FLESH & BLOOD

EROTIC TALES OF CRIME AND PASSION

GUILTY AS SIN

Edited by Max Allan Collins and Jeff Gelb

"THIS IS THE STUFF OF LITERARY VIAGRA."—MICHAEL CONNELLY, author of *Chasing the Dime*

THE NOIR SIDE OF THE SEXES

Back o' Town Blues by David Fulmer

"But, yeah, I pictured her undressed, all right? Like you wouldn't. For the record, I saw her naked in a swath of moonlight, wet with sweat and writhing in slow motion, as languid as a snake uncoiling, her mouth and eyes and chest and pelvis inviting me in, a lush flower beckoning." [P. 28]

A Delicate Mission
by Michael Collins and Gayle Lynds

"Under the bed, Lisa watched in the mirror and wondered how long Matt would or could keep it up. In more than one meaning. She watched as he pumped into the Englishwoman, changing positions, raising her in his hands as she shuddered and moaned and clung to him as if she would never release him or let him out of her." [P. 123]

Feel the Pain by Michael Bracken

"Cassie stood and stepped toward me. It could have been the drink or it could have been on purpose, but she stumbled and fell against me, her heavy breasts pressing against my chest as I wrapped my arms around her to keep her from falling. I smelled her shampoo, her perfume, and the Jack. She tilted her head back. 'I didn't finish thanking you.'" [P. 151]

A Dick and Jane Story by Jack Kelly

"The top couple of buttons of her flannel shirt had come undone—I couldn't help looking. I don't know how I got to be holding her hand. She gripped my fingers the way a kid does. Then we were dancing." [P. 298]

"These stories come from deep down in the velvet folds of the heart. They are full of blood and sex and the kind of sharp-edged passion that often links the two. I sat down to check out one story and ended up going cover to cover. You will too."

—Michael Connelly, author of *Chasing the Dime*

The Flesh and Blood Series

Flesh and Blood: Dark Desires

Flesh and Blood

Erotic Tales of Crime and Passion

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GUILTY AS SIN

EDITED BY

Max Allan Collins and Jeff Gelb

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This volume is dedicated to those noir writers who led the way:

James M. Cain
Raymond Chandler
Dashiell Hammett
Horace McCoy
Mickey Spillane
Jim Thompson
Cornell Woolrich

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INTRODUCTION: SINFUL STREETS

Raymond Chandler spoke of 'mean streets,' a term that has come to signify not just his noble private eye, Philip Marlowe, but the urban punks and poets of Martin Scorcese as well as just about every hero and heroine — and every crook and black widow — of crime fiction ever since.

We used to call the American crime story 'hard-boiled' sometimes it was described as "tough guy." Leave it to French film critics, looking for a vivid way to describe low-budget wartime crime movies from the United States, which they were catching up with, postwar, to come up with the perfect term—noir—to describe this very American style. That they borrowed it from a French publisher, Serie Noire, that reprinted American tough mysteries made it only all the more appropriate.

So it's our pleasure once again to invite you to prowl with us the dark and dangerous sides of the mean streets where modern-day noir flourishes, in ways both traditional and brand new. The previous two volumes of *Flesh and Blood* featured stories by today's finest mystery practitioners, part of our goal has been to display old pros as well as up-and-comers, and the wonderful criminal middle ground between. You will find familiar, even famous bylines herein, as well as names you'll be hearing much more from in years to come.

In this edition, *Flesh and Blood* continues to expand the boundaries of noir fiction with tales that explore everything from erotic espionage to vengeance-seeking flight attendants, in locales

that are sometimes exotic but oftentimes disarmingly mundane the neighborhood bar, bank, or health club Sex can rear its seductive self anywhere as can crime It is in these various places that you'll meet average, normal well, sort of normal; folks, in addition to the extraordinary sorts who so frequently populate crime fiction prepare also to meet private eyes and spies, housewives and husbands, politicians and bank robbers, cops and even dogs

Noir is, after all, a state of mind It can take hold anywhere in a brightly lit drugstore as you catch a glimpse in that overhead, distorting mirror of someone who just might be stalking you, and certainly it's always waiting around a nighttime corner or lurking in daytime shadows The fear, the temptation that is noir may be sitting right next to you, right now—a cocktail-party husband whose wife doesn't understand him, a flirty waitress pouring you a cup of coffee . . .

As in the previous books in this series, *Flesh and Blood Guilty as Sin* is out to shock, titillate, and thrill but in a much safer way than actually helping that husband murder his rich wife or killing that waitress's abusive boyfriend with a tire iron in a truck-stop parking lot All you risk here is a modest cover charge and perhaps a few minutes of sleep, as you try to shake off the sinister feeling one or more of our authors may have wickedly wrapped you in before the nightstand light was clicked off

For these and other crimes, we congratulate our authors for delivering another collection that we feel certain will give you plenty of reasons to shiver and sigh And we congratulate and thank you our readers for your fearless desire to explore life's darkest shadows and to come out the other side, perhaps a bit more paranoid, but also a lot more excited and entertained

And now read on but as the great, late noir writer Fredric Brown once advised don't look behind you!

Max Allan Collins and Jeff Gelb

FLESH AND BLOOD
GUILTY AS SIN

LOW TIDE

Dick Lochte

Shay studied the customer's drivers license. It had been issued by the State of California approximately two years before. It stated that the name of the woman standing across the counter was Noreen Waldman and that she'd been born eighteen years ago. Her photo indicated that in the sixteen months since she'd posed for the DMV Noreen had gone through a few changes. The brunet bangs and rosy cheeks had been traded in for a platinum rooster cut and a chalk-powdered face accentuated by jet eyebrows and purple-black lipstick. Instead of a pressed schoolgirl blouse, Noreen was wearing a boutique-tattered T-shirt over latticed black spandex tights.

The bank was located on L.A.'s Sunset Strip, an area not known for its conservative style of dress, but the girl was pushing it, Shay thought. And her orchid musk was almost as toxic as sewer gas.

But she did have a body on her.

"That's a screamin' corsage," Noreen Waldman said, pointing a black fingernail at the violet flower pinned to Shay's blouse. "I'm going org just looking at it."

Shay responded with a brief, patronizing smile. She placed the ID on the marble counter and picked up the check Noreen Waldman wanted to cash. It was for the sum of fifteen hundred dollars and no cents from Aristo Escorts, Inc., made out to "Nasty Wald." Shay looked at the girl and raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Nom de business," the girl said.

Trying to ignore another blast of the orchid musk, Shay turned the check over. It was properly endorsed. "How would you like it?" she asked.

"In my hand."

"I mean in what denominations, large or small?"

"Like my men, big and hard."

Shay felt the blood rising to her face. She glanced at her cash drawer and saw nothing larger than hundreds. The bank had a prescribed limit to the amount a teller was allowed to keep there. The big bills were in a drawer below, near the carpet. Shay bent down and retrieved three five-hundred-dollar notes.

Nasty stared at the bills on the marble counter. "Can't you find me a Grover down there?"

Trying to hide her annoyance, Shay drew back two of the bills and hunkered down again, exchanging them for a one-thousand-dollar note from the bottom drawer.

Nasty smiled at her, folded the crisp bills once, then twice. Watching Shay watching her, she slid them inside the front of her tights. "My bank box," she said. "Big bills keep it nice and smooth." She touched herself. "Wanna feel?"

Shay stared at her without expression or reply.

"Well, *c'est la vie*." Nasty said, and blew her an orchid-scented kiss.

Shay watched the girl strut to the door.

"You okay?"

Taylor, the security guard, was standing at the counter in his gray uniform, holstered pistol on his hip. His ordinary, almost handsome face registered concern.

"I'm fine," she said.

"Problem with Morticia?"

"Nope."

"Smells like a two bit whore," Taylor said.

"She's a little more expensive than that." Shay said.

"Strictly low tide," Taylor said. When Shay didn't respond, he added, "You know, what's left on the beach after—"

"I got it," Shay said.

He made her nervous. She hadn't seen anything about it in the rule book, but she assumed the bitchy bank manager wouldn't be too crazy about tellers yakking it up with the bank guard during business hours.

"Flower looks better on you than it did on the vine," he said, pointing to the violet bud.

"It was sweet of you."

"It's called a Princess," he said. "You up for a taco at lunch?"

She'd been working at the Sunset branch for only eight days. Her second day she'd made the mistake of letting Taylor share her table at the Mucho Taco down the block. She'd thought he might be able to bring her up to speed on gossip about her coworkers and the manager, Sylvia Berg. But Taylor, a stolid man in his mid-forties whose half-day security turn was supplementing a retirement check from the army, seemed totally indifferent to office politics.

He was one of those God and country guys, full of talk about honor and integrity and all that happy horseshit. But he apparently had a thing for her. That morning he'd brought her the flower. A proud part time security guard. Jesus!

"No taco today, Taylor," she said.

"Tomorrow?"

"We'll see."

She was watching him reluctantly amble back to his position near the door when a considerably more appealing figure caught her eye. Young, wearing an expensive Italian cut cocoa-brown suit, narrow in the waist, broad in the shoulders. Deep-tanned with blond hair that, combed straight back, was long enough to whisk against the collar of his black silk shirt. His eyes were hid

den behind very dark sunglasses so thin and smoothly curved they resembled a burglar's mask.

She was amused by the overall effect. Buccaneer businessman.

He was headed toward her when, suddenly, a rumpled bearded figure plunged in front of him clutching a deposit slip and a wad of cash. The buccaneer businessman shrugged and moved to the teller on her right. Greg something. She could remember the teller's full name if she concentrated.

But her new customer wouldn't let her. He shoved his money and deposit slip at her. "Hurry it up, honey," he said. "Got things to see, people to do."

"Yes, sir," she said.

"Shay."

The teller. Greg whatever, was calling her. His face was pale. Silently he showed her a slip of notepaper. His customer, the buccaneer, was smiling at her.

"What part of 'hurry it up' don't you understand?" her customer asked nastily.

"Y-yes, sir. Just a second."

The neatly typed note read: "My partner is watching with gun. Take two stacks of $500 bills from bottom drawer. Place on counter. No alarm, no harm."

Greg was at his bottom drawer, complying with the request.

Shay searched the room. Business as usual. Taylor stood beside the front door, pointing a customer toward the area known as the platform, where the bank's service reps sat. Sylvia the manager was absent. Probably in the alley catching a smoke. Great timing.

Shay bent down and found two stacks of five hundred-dollar bills. Twenty-five to a stack, tightly wrapped. Twenty-five thousand dollars.

"Hey, honey," her customer said. "What the hell are you doin'? I said I'm in a hurry. Chop-chop."

Then there was a softer voice, almost a whisper. One more

peep out of that hairy mouth and my partner will shoot you in your fucking head. Dig? Good boy. Now I'll take that off your hands."

Shay arose. The buccaneer businessman was standing next to her customer, his back hiding his actions from Taylor. No one else in the bank seemed to notice that a robbery was taking place. The bearded customer stood wide-eyed and frozen as the blond man added his bills to Shay's packs and slipped the combination into his inside coat pocket. Then he took a sideways step and retrieved Greg's packets.

"Thanks for your cooperation," he said quietly. "Stay chilled for five minutes. My partner will leave and nobody bleeds."

He turned and calmly walked toward the door. He stumbled on the way and Taylor grabbed him and helped him regain his balance. The blond man smiled gratefully and Shay could see his lips form the words "Thanks, Officer."

Then he was gone.

Shay, Greg, and the bearded customer stood like statues for about a minute, with the tension growing nearly unbearable. Then the bearded customer threw himself to the floor, shouting, "It's a robbery, goddammit!"

Faces turned their way. Taylor was the first to react, charging toward them, hand on holster. He scowled at the customer in the fetal position on the floor.

"It was the guy in the brown suit," Greg said in a rush. "With the shades."

"His partner's here with a gun," Shay said.

Taylor scanned the frightened and startled faces on the scattered customers. "Not likely. Hit the alarm."

"Done," Greg shouted at Taylor, who was racing to the front door. "And he's got a dye pack."

A dye pack. Shay couldn't believe it. She'd pegged Greg as a total wuss. But he'd had balls enough to slip the buccaneer a dye pack along with a stack of real bills. Two to three minutes after

exposure to the microwave signal at the bank doors, the dye pack would explode, covering the buccaneer with red paint, dying that long blond hair, sending blinding tear gas past those expensive sunglasses, maybe even scorching that expensive suit.

Convinced that there was no longer any danger, the bearded customer rose to his feet just as the branch manager, Sylvia Berg, approached from the rear of the bank. 'What's going on?' she demanded.

"We've been robbed, Sylvia," Shay said.

'Dammit.' The bank manager wheeled around, looking at the startled customers. 'Where's my security?'

"He ran off after the guy," Greg said.

Sylvia pursed her lips, then turned to Shay. 'Your station?'

"And Greg's."

"How much?"

'Twenty-five thousand,' Shay said.

'Twelve thousand five hundred,' Greg said, adding smugly, "And a dye pack."

'You were carrying that much? You know the bank's policy—'

'The robber made us get it from the bottom drawer," Greg said.

He knew about the bottom drawer? I have to call Mysner.' Joseph Mysner was the bank's head of security.

The bearded customer said, 'You in charge?'

"Yes, sir. I'm the branch manager, Sylvia Berg."

"Well, Sylvia, you're out another nine hundred bucks, too. That's what he took off me."

'The robber took your money, Mr. ?"

'Calusia. Chick Calusia. Yeah. He took my cash. And it's this broad's fault."

Sylvia's unblinking, birdlike green eyes shifted to Shay.

"My fault?"

'If you'd got off your ass and deposited my cash, I'd of been out of here."

"Shay?" Sylvia asked.

"I'm sorry. This gentleman' started to hand me his deposit which was for only six hundred dollars, by the way—and that's when the robber—"

"Excuse me sister You move like you're being paid by the hour I was standin here for ten fucking minutes waiting for you to get it in gear. And the amount was nine hundred fucking dollars '

"Sylvia, that's not—"

"We'll discuss this in a—"

Sylvia was interrupted by the sound of gunfire from out on Sunset All conversation stopped in the bank People turned toward the front door, curious, afraid

A young man with spiked hair and tattoo-covered arms banged against the door, backed up, and tried again This time he got it open. Call the cops," he shouted, ducking down, hands protecting the back of his partially shaved head "There's a dude out in the street, wailin with a gun Crazy Covered in red paint "

Shay's heart skipped a beat.

Ignoring Sylvia and the bearded man, she rushed to the teller gate fumbled it open, and headed for the front door She heard Sylvia calling her name. Screw her.

Shay stepped from the bank to a glare bright, shockingly subdued Sunset Boulevard Traffic had stopped. People were pressed against the sides of buildings Everyone seemed to be staring at the red-dye stained figure sitting in the middle of the street, keening in pain, hands pressed against his tearing eyes. His discarded gun was at his side

It was the bank guard, Taylor.

Taylor's eyes stung so much his mind wasn't working One side of his chest seemed to be aflame His eyes felt like they'd been hit by acid He knew he was down and in trouble He just

couldn't sort out what had happened. Had he been shot? Stabbed? Maybe he could start to figure it out if he opened his eyes. But they hurt so bad. What hurt even worse was that he'd fucked up, dishonored himself.

He was brought back to some semblance of reality by a woman calling his name. He recognized the voice. The beautiful teller. Shay.

"We've got to get you out of the street," she said.

Car horns began to blare.

He nodded.

She bent beside him, guided his arm around her shoulders. "Up we go."

Even through the pain and confusion he was vitally aware of her body rubbing against his as they struggled. Then he was up. Not quite balanced, but up. She hugged his waist, her firm breasts pressing against his arm as she walked him slowly toward the bank. His eyes were wet, still burning, but he was catching up to the situation. "My gun," he said.

"In the street. I'll get it in a second."

"Christ! Did I shoot anybody?" he asked.

"Not that I can see," she said, propping him against the front of the bank.

Blinking through the tears, he watched her blurred image run back into the street, bend down, and retrieve his gun. What a goddamned woman! And what a goddamn disgrace he was.

They fired his ass, of course.

Taylor's chest was tender from the dye pack, but the skin wasn't even broken. An optometrist from the neighboring discount glasses store checked his eyes and bathed them in some kind of fluid.

The burning had just about disappeared when the bank's head of security, Joseph Mysner, showed up with John Pinella the head of American Guard Services, the guy Taylor worked for Mysner looked like a college footballer gone to seed, big, balding, and red-faced At about half his size Pinella was a sleek, olive complexioned man wearing a wrinkle free pinstriped suit and a faintly amused smile.

Taylor sat quietly in the banks conference room while Sylvia Berg and the two men discussed his pathetic response to the robbery They all seemed to be on the same page He'd fucked up royally. He couldn't disagree

When the bank reps left to "confab with the arriving FBI agents, Pinella sighed and shook his head "You really fucked the duck, my boy."

Taylor looked down at the bright stains on his hands He had them under his chin, too "Guess that's why my face is so red, huh?"

"It's the gunplay I don't get Pinella said "That the way you did it in the MPs? Shoot first?"

The question shook Taylor But there was no way Pinella could know about the way he did it in the MPs, no way anyone alive could "I never took a dye pack to the chest and face before," he said "I coulda sworn I'd been hit by incoming, Cap Pinella liked his men to call him Cap

"That's the other thing You let the goddamned perp slip the pack into your jacket pocket."

Right That's what really galled him The son of a bitch had played him Just like the towelhead had played him that night in Kuwait City But he'd found the Arab scam artist again and regained some of his self respect He felt his fury rising but this wasn't the place for it He took some deep breaths and said, "You think I like being played for an asshole Cap?

Pinella's face softened a little "Guess not," he said

"It'd be nice to get out of here. Go to bed and nurse my wounds."

"Not gonna happen, guy. Not for a while. You got cops to talk to, and FBIes, and paperwork like you've never seen. Lucky nobody got hurt."

"Except me," Taylor said. "Maybe I should check in with a lawyer."

Pineda frowned. "Don't piss me off, Taylor. You already put us in the soup. Be a good boy and we'll find you something to do. Night watchman. Something."

Key-rist. Night goddamned watchman. If only he could get his hands on that fucking Mr. Slick, he'd . . . aw, what the hell!

Taylor staggered from the conference room in search of cops and/or feds. He desperately wanted to do what he had to and get the hell away from the bank, from the scene of his humiliation and failure.

He wasn't sure how he felt about seeing Shay, but he needn't have worried. She wasn't in the main room. Probably off somewhere being questioned. Debriefed. He hated jargon like that. It was one of the things he didn't miss from the MPs.

Shay had expected to stay the full day at the bank, but she was out and away by three in the afternoon. And once again at liberty.

She'd asked for it. There was about an hour in which she sat around waiting to give her deposition. And another hour, roughly, before the representatives of law and order were finished with her. At that point she and Sylvia got into a discussion about Chick Calusia and the amount of his deposit.

"Since the robber took Mr. Calusia's deposit slip with his money," Sylvia had told her, "it's your word against his."

"So?"

"So we're depositing nine hundred dollars into Mr. Calusia's

account,' Sylvia said 'And to minimize the banks exposure to possible legal action initiated by Mr Calusia, you're going to personally apologize to him for any inconvenience or indignity he may have experienced."

"I don't think so," Shay said.

This isn t a discussion If you wish to continue working here at the bank—"

'Fuck the bank.' Shay replied 'Fuck Mr Calusta and, Sylvia, especially, fuck you."

Shay was feeling remarkably alive as she drove through the afternoon traffic She was approaching the house when she recognized a woman driving past in a periwinkle blue Miata convertible, her short platinum hair dancing in the wind

It took a few seconds for Shay to weigh the odds of her crossing paths with Nasty Wald again that day She didn t put much stock in coincidence.

Taylor was lying on his couch in his underwear watching TV when the door buzzer sounded He d been there for nearly an hour sipping vodka from a half gallon plastic jug and trying to get his mind off the humiliation he'd suffered On the small screen a woman in a dress cut down to her pierced navel appeared to be singing while a shirtless stud, standing behind her kissed her neck and ran a hand the size of a phone book down her firm thigh Taylor had the sound turned down as far as it would go He hated contemporary music But he was a big fan of videos.

He d seen this particular one before and he knew that as a result of the stud s rubbing, or something the singer's nipples were about to burgeon under the gauzy gown Whoever was at his door knocked.

Annoyed, he called out, Go away.'

"It's me, Shay."

Taylor grabbed the remote and clicked off the TV right in the middle of the nipple shot, then rolled off the couch. "Minute," he told her. He looked down and saw that he was poking out of his Skivvies. He staggered to the bedroom and grabbed a ratty striped bathrobe from the floor where he'd dropped it a couple days ago. When he got to the front door, his fingers struggled with the slip lock before it came free.

Then she was standing in the doorway. Outlined by the dim lighting in the hall, she reminded him of the way women looked in movies when he was in the first throes of puberty. The Angie Dickinson kind of blonde—full bodied, golden haired, the back light adding an irresistible air of streetlamp mystery.

She was wearing the same clothes she'd had on earlier at the bank. But her blouse had lost its press, its top buttons were undone, and her legs were bare under her skirt. "Okay if I come in?" she asked.

"Wha—oh sure. Yeah."

He was embarrassed by the place. It was a cheap furnished apartment in a lousy section of town. But she didn't seem to care about the surroundings one way or another. "I was worried about you," she said.

"I'm okay." He kicked sections of the morning paper out of the way, opening a path to the couch. "Sit down. Can I, uh, get you something?"

"Maybe later," she said. "Right now, you should get dressed and come with me."

"What?"

"You stoned, Taylor?" she asked, not reprimanding him, merely curious.

"I'm okay," he said a little defensively.

Her eyes dropped to his crotch and she smiled. "I guess you *are* glad to see me," she said. His dick was poking through the robe.

Mortified, he tucked himself away.

She moved closer and to his surprise and pleasure placed her hand on his erection. "That's some icebreaker," she said. Then she rose on tiptoe to kiss him. Her lips were soft and moist and he felt them part as her tongue slid past.

His battered body shivered as her pelvis rubbed against him, her tongue exploring his mouth. Then she pulled away, breathing heavily. "That was ... good for openers," she said.

He reached for her, but she danced away. "Not just yet. There's something more important for us to take care of."

"I don't think so," Taylor said, reaching for her again.

"I know where he is," she said. "Right this minute."

Taylor's boozy, sex-revved mind couldn't take the shift. "He?"

"The man who robbed the bank."

He blinked. "You found him? How?"

"The freak show girl who came in just before him. The one you called low tide. She drove by me a while ago and it got me to thinking. She made me open my bottom drawer. Then the crook showed and he knew where we keep the big bills. Anyway, she drove past and I followed her right to the bastard."

"I was going to call the police. But I got fired today, too. So I don't give a damn about the money or the bank. But I do give a damn about you, and I hate the way you've been fucked over. All your talk about honor and pride. I figured you for the kind of guy who'd rather do the job himself."

"You got that right," he said. Goddamn, but she was one of a kind! "Where are they?"

"Get dressed and I'll show you," she said.

It was at that moment that Taylor discovered something new about himself. He wanted her more than he wanted revenge. "They can wait," he said, pulling her to him.

"There's no time," she began. But her resistance was half-hearted. When they kissed, the fever he was feeling seemed to

infect her, too. Her hand pushed his robe aside just as his went beneath her skirt.

The couch was only a few feet away, but they didn't get that far. They made love on the hard floor, the sheets of the discarded morning paper crackling and tearing beneath them. She wasn't wearing anything under the skirt. He slid right into her.

Taylor was nearly delirious with pleasure. When he thought about it later, he wondered if part of his euphoria wasn't due to the prospect of getting his hands on that smug fucking bank robber.

"What do we do if they're gone?" Shay said as Taylor's battered pea-green Chevy bounced along the freeway.

"Find 'em again." He liked having her with him, liked everything about her. But, in his postcoital mood, romance was losing its battle with revenge. Even with her hand on his lap.

The hand moved and he felt himself stirring. But it was the Beretta Centurion stuck behind his belt that she touched. "This isn't the same gun . . .

"At the bank? Hell no. That one's in a bag in some evidence locker. This is something I picked up overseas."

"You ever . . . use it?"

"There was a time something happened, kinda like what went down at the bank. This Kuwaiti asshole set me up."

"What'd he do?"

"Tried to disgrace me, to make me less a man," Taylor said. He wasn't about to provide her with any of the details.

"Turn here," Shay said.

The canyon road took an abrupt upward angle. As they continued following the road, the dinner-hour traffic thinned to almost nothing. The higher they went, the fewer houses they

passed. The occasional streetlights did a lousy job of chasing the night away.

Inside the car, there wasn't much conversation, until

"There," Shay said, pointing to a shadowy two-story wooden house tucked into a notch in the canyon wall. A shiny black Porsche Boxster was parked near a wooden stairwell that led to an upper-level entrance. A light was on deep in the house.

Taylor gave the place a snapshot glance, then continued up the canyon just far enough to be out of view from the house. He hugged the canyon wall, leaving enough room for other cars to pass if the drivers were careful. "Only the Porsche," he said. "The girl's?"

"She was driving a Miata. He must be alone."

"Or they both left in her car."

"I don't think so," Shay said. "If they'd gone somewhere together, he'd have wanted to drive the Boxster, right? Mr. Macho."

"Probably," Taylor said. "I'll go see." He opened his door.

She slid over to get out, too. "No. You stay," he said. He pulled the Beretta from his belt.

"What's your plan?" she asked, eyes on the gun.

"That's why I want you to stay here," he said. "So you won't know."

He eased the car door shut. Shay's face looked pale in the moonlight. Pale and beautiful and troubled. He leaned through the open window and kissed her on the lips. It was a cool, almost passionless kiss.

"It'll be fine," he said.

He was expecting her to say something like "Be careful." Or maybe "Don't shoot unless you have to."

She said, "Any hint of trouble, honey, shoot the son of a bitch."

She was definitely one in a million.

The left side of the house came within inches of the canyon

wall. On the other side a high wooden gate guarded what appeared to be a narrow path to the rear. The gate was locked. That left the door at the top of the stairs.

Taylor climbed the heavy wooden steps quickly and soundlessly. As he approached the front door, he could hear music. Samba, maybe. The door was cracked an inch or so. He used the gun barrel to push it open farther.

Light filtered through a glass wall at the rear of the house. There was enough of it to illuminate a room with a few pieces of cheap wicker furniture. A couple of chairs, a matching table, a sofa with cushions of a dark color that might have been black or midnight blue. The floor was unfinished, the walls bare. The only things that suggested human occupancy were the odors of the punk girl's cheap orchid perfume and something even more repellent.

Taylor moved cautiously and quietly across the concrete, stepping down into a sunken area that had no furniture at all. The glass wall looked out on a brightly lit patio with a wooden deck and a small dark pool constructed to resemble a lagoon. A stream flowed into it from a fake waterfall that seemed to extend from the canyon wall. The music was coming from a medium-sized boom box on the deck, between a couple of cheap lawn chairs. A beer bottle was on its side near the boom box.

Satisfied that the pool area was deserted, Taylor moved to the right, where a narrow hall led to a shadowy bedroom. The odors intensified. Decaying orchids and sex and overriding them both the nearly toxic smell of feces and urine. Holding his breath, Taylor stood at the doorway to the bedroom, getting a quick fix on it before stepping in.

It, too, drew its light from the patio through an open sliding glass door. It was the only room in the place that looked lived in. Clothes were thrown around, male and female. A wastebasket overflowed with cleaners bags and wrappers. The bed looked

well used, with what appeared to be black silk sheets rumpled enough for the mattress to peek through. From his position, Taylor could see nothing to account for the terrible smell.

Near the foot of the bed was a pile of loose thousand dollar bills and a packet of money that still had the bank seal attached. If the loot was still around . . .

Taylor took a step into the bedroom and immediately regretted it. His peripheral vision picked up a naked arm pointing a gun directly at him from a corner of the room.

Taylor froze, then slowly raised his hands, slipping his finger from the trigger guard of the gun but not dropping the weapon. He didn't know what else to do. He figured the robber would tell him. Or shoot him.

There was only silence.

He turned his head in what he hoped was a nonthreatening manner.

The man with the gun was the same one who'd robbed the bank and ruminated him. He wasn't looking so good. He was naked, huddled in the corner, his skin waxy and tinged with blue. His gun arm was propped on top of a wicker table. His head rested against a wall, unblinking eyes flat and cloudy, staring at the doorway without seeing it.

Taylor was reasonably sure the man was dead, but he still took a sideways step out of the line of fire. His eyes were watering from the stench, his stomach churning, as he cautiously approached the naked body. Blood, now crusted, had flowed from three holes in the bank robber's chest and stomach. He was seated in his own excrement, not that he minded the discomfort.

Taylor reached over the table and grabbed the barrel of the naked man's gun. But he couldn't pry it loose without breaking fingers. There was no pulse in the man's neck. He was definitely an ex-human. Let him keep the fucking gun if it meant so much to him.

Taylor felt a breeze against his neck and turned quickly.

Shay stood at the bedroom door, a handkerchief pressed to her nose. In her other hand she held a gun. Everybody had one these days, it seemed.

"I was worried," she said, lowering the weapon. "Is he dead?"

"None deader," Taylor said.

"I didn't hear . . . You didn't . . . ?"

"Shoot him? No. This happened a while ago. He's already starting to stiffen up," he said, walking toward her. "Let's get out of here."

"The freak must have killed him."

"That's a good bet. C'mon. Before I toss."

"Look at all the money," Shay said behind the kerchief.

"Yeah. Stomach full of bullets and he still was able to scare her off before she could grab any of it."

"You think that's what happened?"

Taylor nodded. "Let's get out of here."

"Shame to leave all that money." She moved into the room. Shoving the handkerchief into a pocket, she grabbed a handful of the loose bills.

They'd been covering something small and violet.

Taylor blinked, but the violet object didn't go away. It was the Princess flower he'd given Shay that morning.

She saw it, too. "Well, shit," she said and pointed her gun at him. It was a nice little Walther, he noticed. A good choice. Better drop that piece of yours, huh, Taylor."

She threw the money back on the pile and picked up his Beretta. "A gun in each hand, she said. "Let's take this out on the patio. It's getting a little close in here."

* * *

Shay followed Taylor out into a warm night and the sound of samba music and the gurgling of the fake waterfall. It was a relief to breathe, to clean some of the stench from her nostrils.

"Whoo-eee," she said, using her clothed elbow to slide the door shut behind them. "I always knew Del was full of shit, but c'mon now."

"What happened, Shay? You catch him with the punk bimbo?"

"You want to turn off that music?" she said. "I don't much feel like a mambo right now."

It took him a second to find the off button on the boom box.

"Now sit," Taylor," she said. "We have to talk."

"It won't do us any good if we're caught here with ol' Del," he said.

"This place is pretty isolated."

"Miss Low Tide might come back."

"I hope not," she said. "Three's a crowd. Sit."

The lawn chair scraped against the deck under his weight.

"Lie back," she said. "That way we can talk without me worrying about you making some stupid macho move." She perched on the edge of the remaining chair. "First off, I didn't kill Del. It must've been the psycho bitch. I saw her driving away."

"You Del's wife?"

"No way. We played around a little. That was about three years ago, when I was still an honest, underpaid teller at a bank in Arizona. Del picked me up in a bar. He fucked me and together we fucked the bank. Then we fucked more banks. Once I wised up a little, saw the kind of fella he was, I ended the romance. Too many deadly diseases out there. Del couldn't keep it in his pants and he didn't believe in rubbers. Since then, we've just been business partners, me getting jobs at banks and him robbing 'em."

"How does Miss Low Tide fit in?" Taylor asked.

She shrugged. "My guess is he picked her up today. It was just

like him to be hustling tramps on the street in front of a bank he was about to rob."

'Why'd she shoot him? Lovers' quarrel?

'Who the hell knows? Maybe she saw the money, tried to kill him but screwed up. He was able to get his own gun and chase her off."

He had his head cocked to one side, looking at her with an odd smile. She suspected he was wondering if she was bullshitting him, if she'd been the one who'd put the holes in Del. Was there something on her face for him to read? Maybe that she'd left the bank earlier than Del had expected and saw the crew cut bitch driving away. That the goddamned house had been reeking of the stink of orchids and their lovemaking. That fucking Del hadn't even bothered to put his clothes back on or change the sheets.

Could he tell that Del, the insatiable bastard, had thrown her down on that still damp bed and fucked her and then gone out to the patio for the beer that he'd been drinking? Could Taylor see it in her eyes that she'd put her clothes back on, found the money and one of Del's several guns, and called out sweetly for him to come back to the bedroom?

He'd been at the patio door, smug and with a hard on, when she shot him twice. But the bastard didn't fall. He staggered toward her and she lost it. Dropped the money and shot him again. He fell on the bed and she thought that had to be the end of it. But as she moved toward the fallen loot, he rolled over on the bed. In his hand was his gun, the one he slept with.

She stumbled back without the cash, firing again as she ran from the room.

Breathless, she paused near the front door, considering the situation. She'd shot him what? Three, maybe four times? How long could it take for the blood to run out of him?

There was no sound from the bedroom. Just the fucking radio music out on the patio.

"Hey, Del," she called out. "How's it hanging?"

"Come on in and see, baby."

Shit. He didn't sound that weak. So what? She could outwait him. Then grab the loot and drift away. But ... the cash was minimal, compared to the more than four hundred grand Del had stashed away in bank boxes across the state. He used to joke that he wasn't stealing the money, he was merely moving it around from one bank to another. She'd made it her business to keep track of the locations and the various fake names he'd used. And she could do a fair job of imitating his handwriting. But she couldn't stand in for him. She needed a man to front the deal.

That was when she'd thought of Taylor.

She was a little startled when he asked, "Why'd you come to my apartment, Shay? What am I doing here?"

"I'll level with you," she said. "At the bank I thought you were a nice enough guy, but there wasn't anything there for me. Then Del messed you up. When I saw you like that, blind and in pain, I felt ... I'm not sure what I felt. But it was something ... different. Intimate." The weird thing was that she wasn't lying, exactly.

"That's good?"

"Yeah. Intimacy. Something I've been missing."

"It'd help me to believe that," Taylor said, "if you put down the guns."

She hesitated, then thought, What the hell? She needed him, needed his cooperation. Considering the sort of lovesick way he was looking at her, she didn't think she needed the guns. She placed them on the deck. "Better?"

"Much." He leaned forward and picked up her Walther. Sniffed it and smiled. "Sorry, but I had to make sure."

"I know," she said. The gun she'd used, one of Del's many, was resting at the bottom of the canyon. She stood slowly. "Maybe we'd better collect my stuff, clean up a little, and get going."

'There's no hurry, like you said.' He shifted his legs to make room for her.

She sat down, facing him. She felt a slight unease because she couldn't quite read his mood. But she was a firm believer in her sexual attraction. She was convinced she could seduce him into joining her in collecting Del's loot. She placed a hand on his arm. "After the — incident at the bank today," she said, "I wanted to stay with you while you were recovering. But Sylvia and that security guy insisted I go with them."

She tenderly touched one of the red splotches on his neck. He closed his eyes, apparently enjoying her touch. "What happened after you left the bank?" he asked.

"I drove here."

"Del was alive?"

"Yes. I told him I'd decided to end the partnership. He wasn't happy. I was packing a bag when he grabbed me and dragged me to the front of the house. He threw me out, told me never to come back. I said I wanted my things. He laughed at me. Slammed and locked the door. There wasn't much else I could do, so I drove away. When I reached the bottom of the drive, Little Miss Punk passed me driving up."

"Why didn't you tell me all this before?"

"I — didn't want you to know I was involved in the robbery." Was that true? Good lies always had a little truth hidden in them. She didn't want to lose him. Was it more than just the money? Maybe. "I was afraid you'd throw me out, too."

"I'd never do that," he said.

She pressed against him, resting her head on his chest. His arm went around her shoulders. "I love you, Taylor," she said. "It just might work, you and me."

His body relaxed. His hand moved a strand of her hair so that he could kiss her ear. "You and me," he whispered.

Something was definitely happening to her. She was no

longer conning him. She was falling in love with him. Either that or she was conning herself.

"I don't want any secrets between us," he said.

"No secrets," she agreed, curious now as to where he was headed.

"You asked me about the Kuwaiti who screwed me over," he said. "Still want to hear the story?"

"If you want to share it," she said.

"Seven years ago in the Persian Gulf, during my last tour of duty, about eight o'clock at night, a pretty local girl waved down my jeep near this town of Kazimah. Her boyfriend had gotten pissed at her and left her out there on the road to hitch back to Kuwait City. She was a secretary for one of the oil companies, she said. The whole thing was a lie. A setup."

"A setup for what?" Shay asked.

"My partner, Jeb Cooley, and I were scheduled that night to guard an army warehouse. While the girl and I were—while we were at her place, her lover and some other guys bounced a lead pipe off of Jeb's skull and cleaned out the warehouse. Nothing crucial like arms or medicine. Just cases of whiskey, wine, beer, Coca-Cola, little foil pouches of macadamia nuts—crap like that—all of it about to be sent out to temporary officers' clubs throughout the area. Over a hundred grand in booze and snacks, worth three times that on the Kuwaiti black market."

"You must've got in terrible trouble."

"No. I told everybody I'd had a flat tire. They were suspicious, of course, and on my ass for a while, but since I wasn't really involved in the robbery, there was no way they could find any evidence. Still, the suspicion was there. Jeb, who'd been as close to me as a brother, put in for a new partner. And that was that for my military career."

"Why didn't you try to catch the real thieves?" she asked.

He smiled ruefully. "That was the beauty of it. If I'd brought

in the Kuwaiti who planned the break in, the story about me and the girl would have come out. I would have gotten off the hook for the theft, but I'd have been found guilty of dereliction of duty. By keeping the lie I could at least get an honorable discharge and collect a pension."

"So the guy who pulled the robbery walked away free and clear."

"Not exactly," Taylor said. "I found him and I beat him with my gun butt until my arm got tired. He never recovered."

"You killed him?" She seemed shocked.

"Don't you think he deserved it? He robbed me of my good name and my self respect and he forced me to give up the only job I ever loved."

"Oh, honey," she said, hugging him. Then a question popped into her head. Without thinking, she began. "What happened to the g—" She censored herself.

But not soon enough. "The girl?" he asked. "What happened to her?"

I guess. Did you ever see her again?

"Once more," he said. "The guy—the one I pistol-whipped to death—there'd been nothing personal in what he did. I was just somebody in the way of his plan, so he had me removed. But the girl—she made it very personal. I had no choice. I did the only thing I could."

Shay was frowning now. She didn't really want to know, but she heard herself asking. "Wha-what did you do to her?"

"What I had to," Taylor said. "I did this." He pointed her own Walther against her taut stomach.

She barely got out the word "No" before he pulled the trigger.

Taylor rested Shay's body on the chair. Her cheek was still warm when he kissed it. He dabbed at his tears. Then he wiped the

Walther clean. He wiped the power button of the boom box, too. He was glad the white-haired freak hadn't participated in the robbery in his humiliation. Taking a human life gave him no pleasure.

He paused for one final look at Shay. "You and me," he said.

He reentered the dreadful bedroom and tossed Shay's Walther onto the rolled king-size. Holding his breath, he wiped his prints from the barrel of Del's pistol.

As he made his way to the door, he was stopped by the pile of cash. Over thirty-five thousand dollars. A nice bundle of found money. But it was stolen goods. Tainted. It offered no temptation to a man who prided himself on honor and integrity.

Taylor bent down and reached past the money to pick up the wilted violet flower. He took that away with him. He thought he'd get it laminated. Carry it in his wallet. Once the red dye and the burns wore off, it would give him something to remember Shay by.

BACK O' TOWN BLUES

David Fulmer

She looked up as I came through the door in a blaze of white afternoon light. Then she dropped her gaze. I wasn't the one she was expecting, and I wasn't much to look at once you took away the blaze.

Still, I was the only other customer in that low-down Cabbagetown joint at three o'clock that afternoon, and she threw a few more blank glances my way, though she showed about the same amount of interest in the old beer signs on the wall and the collection of baseball caps that hung from the exposed rafters. Actually the caps got more.

"What's with the hats?" I heard her ask the bartender.

"They belonged to customers who died," he said without raising his head from his paper. You could tell by the tone of his voice that he'd only answered the question about nine hundred times.

She looked at him uncertainly, waiting for the punch line, but he just turned another page of his paper, soundlessly, and studied the bold headline: "Trick Cigar Blows Man's Head Off!"

She stared at him, then looked over at me, as if I was in on the riff. I kept my gaze averted. I wasn't in on anything.

Her attention seemed to wander into another time zone as she dipped into her drink, but eventually she got around to me again. She had to be wondering why any male with a pulse who found himself alone in an afternoon saloon with a piece like her wasn't going to try at least a flyby. But I wasn't there for that, and so we sat ten feet away from each other, on opposite sides of the

horseshoe bar a good half hour without exchanging a word. I got up to make a phone call and to drop some quarters in the jukebox. I was surprised to find that among the usual crap they had a few gems, including, no lie, Louis Armstrong's "Back o' Town Blues."

Halfway through the thirty-first minute, as I was pondering the odd happenstance of that record turning up on 45, on a jukebox, in that raunchy dump of all places, she spoke up. "You played it twice," she said.

It took me a few seconds to realize I was the one she was addressing from behind her gray spiral of cigarette smoke. "Excuse me?"

She made the smallest motion with her thumb. "That song. You played it twice."

I looked over at the jukebox and said, "Yeah, well . . ." and went back to minding my own business. I could feel her baffled gaze on the side of my face and I sensed her surprise that I had not taken the opening to launch myself from my stool, swing around the bar like it was turn four on the last lap at Daytona, and slam myself flush up against her smoky-eyed, soft-lipped, cleavage heaving, hip-swaying, very fine self. Maybe she thought I was gay. Or too stupid to notice that the door was open. Maybe whatever. She wasn't going to let it alone.

"What, you don't want to talk to me?" she demanded before another half minute had passed.

I came up with the vaguest gesture I could manage. My second pass at "Back o' Town Blues" led into the Olympics' "Shimmy Like Kate," another bizarrely out of place selection. I tapped my foot on the bar rail and tried to remember when I'd heard it last.

While I was tapping, she was slipping down off her stool to come around the end of the bar and into my field of vision. She looked even better full-length, with one hand on a jutting hip, the other holding her drink and cigarette at the level of her bust.

line. Her dress was simple, off-white cotton that looked worn and new at the same time, cut low in front and clinging like a second skin.

She seemed frankly amused by my lack of interest in her. It was either a new experience or one she hadn't encountered in a while. She managed a faint smile as she pointed with her chin and said, "That seat taken?"

She didn't wait to find out if I would be rude or crazy enough to blow her off. She stepped up and slid onto the stool like it had her name carved on it. She said, "Hey," and the bartender raised his head from his tabloid. "Give my good friend here another one on me." The bartender nodded, finished the sentence she had interrupted, and then stepped to the liquor well.

I grabbed a glance at her while she was calling over her order. She was prettier up close. Younger looking, too. Too young for me, and too wild. I caught the glint in her eye. Imagine a prime Tuesday Weld on crank. She belonged out there someplace where she could rock and roll until the dawn's early light. My days in that part of town were long over.

But, yeah, I pictured her undressed, all right? Like you wouldn't. For the record, I saw her naked in a swath of moonlight, wet with sweat and writhing in slow motion, as languid as a snake uncoiling, her mouth and eyes and chest and pelvis inviting me in, a lush flower beckoning to a waiting bee.

All that in the space of one dreamy second. Back in the real world, she was parked next to me in a low rent tavern in a broken-down corner of a city. In another year the place would be razed to make room for town houses or maybe a multiuse development with a rustic name like Glenwood Forest. The El Rancho would be a memory. I wondered what they would do with all the hats.

When the bartender brought my drink, she tossed some bills at him and then turned her head to give me a sleepy, Veronica

Lake, over the shoulder look. It struck me that neither she nor her pose belonged in that seedy joint. Of course, I didn't belong there either. So for that brief moment, we were two dice rolling down a fixed table.

"So why ain't you at work?" she asked me.

"Maybe I am."

One side of her luscious red mouth dipped in a smile. "Oh, yeah? Okay, what do you do? No, wait. I bet I can guess." She cocked her head a little farther to the side. "You're either a writer, a musician, or a criminal."

"No, no, and no."

She waited, then raised an eyebrow. "Well? You going to tell me?"

"It's boring," I murmured. I gave it another second and said, "What about you?"

"Me?" She sat up. "I just ran away to join the circus."

"And do what?"

Her eyes got childishly bright. "I want to get shot out of one of those cannons. You ever see those guys?" She used her hand to describe an arc. "Only I'd keep on going." She came down from her flight and eyed me inquisitively. "You probably sell something, right?"

I shrugged. I didn't want to talk about it. Because I did sell something. Hell, everyone was selling something, her included. I took another look. Especially her.

"What I want to know is, what are you doing in this dump?" she said.

"Having a drink. Listening to the jukebox. Getting in out of the rain."

"It's not raining," she said, and smiled again. Sweet stuff.

"You're right, it's not." I sipped my drink. "And you? What brings you to this humble establishment in the middle of a weekday afternoon? Are you waiting for somebody?"

Not anymore, she said and the way it came out, I didn't want to touch it.

We listened to the jukebox. Now it was "Hello, Josephine," and Fats's chugging piano made me smile.

What's your favorite song? She was grinning, too, as if she had tuned in on my frequency.

"I've got about fifty of them."

"Name three."

I named three and each one got the same faintly puzzled look. I knew she was thinking now it was her turn, but I didn't feel like playing. I did not want to know which songs she loved best. I lifted my drink and heard the ice cubes clink against the glass.

I changed the subject. To her, in fact, which worked out fine because that was what she'd wanted all along. The whole point of this exercise was for her to spill her story to someone—to anyone—and I made the cut.

She said her name was Parris ("but not like France") and she had grown up outside Atlanta, in one of those once-sleepy hamlets that were hives for dumb rednecks who fought the modern age as stubbornly as their poor ancestors had fought Yankees, and with the same success. Now that the greedheads were running the show, she wouldn't know her hometown from any one of a thousand others. They were all gone, gobbled by the same insatiable beast that would soon be coming for the L. Rancho Bar and Rest. General Sherman was an angel of restraint compared to how ruthlessly the developers were raping the landscape around there. Likewise, few back in the trailer park would recognize her. She was all big-city girl now, with the moves to prove it.

She didn't provide these details as much as I gleaned them from the broad strokes she drew as she talked on, her voice moving from smoky husk to bubbling girlish excitement. I guessed that she might have been a cheerleader once.

Soon her tale took a dark turn, a small-town soap opera of

love and loss. She had come of age ready to devour life's bounty. She and her beau married and moved to the city to work and start a family. Then she miscarried and the dream cracked and crumbled. He left her for another woman. She drank and took drugs and lay down with an assortment of worthless creeps who had ravaged her sweet flesh. She hit bottom, but now she was going to start all over again. Her last no good man was her last one, so she swore. She was going to go somewhere else and be someone else. Because that's what she *did*. She was a *survivor*. She seemed very eager for me to buy this, so I kept nodding to please her.

She was lying, of course, though I couldn't tell if it was the whole crazy story or just selected parts. I don't know if she cared whether I believed her or not. She reminded me of my daughters when they were little, and their wide-eyed looks when they flew off on their wondrous fancies.

That stopped me. It was always the same. Sooner or later, I ended up thinking about young women as daughters. Murderers, murder victims, crack whores dying of AIDS, and all the dregs and losers had been somebody's daughter once. Most of them had been loved, at least for a little while. And then something happened, or a whole bunch of somethings, as they had happened to this one on the stool next to mine, though she had come out of it in one piece. She was doing all right so far. Or so she claimed.

She went on with her story, leaning closer, her eyes on mine, all hungry and intense. Now someone's daughter was drawing me in, as surely as if she had sunk a sharp, wicked hook into my cheek.

Just then, as if to save my very soul, my Little Willie John selection came up on the jukebox and I had a reason to turn away from her. "Listen to this," I said.

Her gaze slid to the jukebox. The song was 'Let Them Talk,'

and she bent an ear to the lush swell of the song still leaning forward, looking like she was poised to be swept away by the electric swirl of that magical voice or the next strong wind whichever got to her first.

I had felt that way once More than once I tried to remember when it was, without much luck She leaned closer and I was having a hard time concentrating

She stayed there until the jukebox had given up everything it had that was even marginally worthy Two men walked in, suits in plain suits. She stared at them and they clocked her, too They sat down in one of the booths on the opposite wall

She turned back to me I've got to get out of here, she said

"All right."

She pressed one gentle finger to a point just below my mouth "Come along with me."

"To where?"

She slid down off her stool and moved in all the way, pushing herself between my legs and dropping a hand around the back of my neck "To where?" She stared into my eyes without flinching "To wherever we can lay down tonight

I could feel the heat coming off her and I cleared my throat "I'm not—"

'C *mon*,' she said, sounding all urgent now 'What are you afraid of?"

"It's not that "

"What, then?"

I couldn't think of anything I wanted to but I couldn't

She said, "You got a car, right?"

"Yeah, I've got a car."

She stepped back "Then let's go."

I watched her face Now everything would change I said "Okay, let's go."

—

When we got outside she blinked in the sunlight making her look all the more like a child She laid a hand on the edge of the roof of the sedan waiting for me to unlock the door for her So that we could escape.

I stopped a few feet away from her I must have given her a look, because her brow furrowed and she said, 'What? What's wrong?"

"He's dead, Parris," I said.

It took her a second to get it She tottered and her face fell into something like a little girl's pout At that moment I wanted to reach out, put an arm around her and tell her everything would be all right But that's not what I was there for Anyway, the child who needed that comfort was already booking out

"When?" she said in a flat voice.

This morning He's lucky he lasted the night "

She let out a long breath, as if she had settled something inside her Would it make any difference if I told you he deserved it?"

'You better save that for the jury ' I said

"How'd you find me?"

It wasn't hard,' I said People tend to notice you ' That brought a glimmer of a smile Why the hell did you hang around?"

She gave me a sideways glance 'In case I had to finish it She sounded a little bored with the subject Are you a cop?

'I was Private now I still get called in "

"What's your name?"

"Ray."

"Ray. Ray what?"

"McTell."

We both waited for something.

"It was that bad?" I said.

It was that bad " she said 'So now what?'

The *now what* was already in motion. The two men who had entered the bar came out the door, both reaching for their shields. The taller of the two, John Wells, stepped up and took hold of her wrist. Parris Boland, he said, 'you're under arrest for the murder of Anthony Mott. You have the right to remain silent . . .'

Before they took her away she asked for another moment to talk to me. She was cuffed and Wells shrugged and said, 'One minute.' I steered her around the back of the car and out of earshot. The detectives exchanged glances, but I didn't care.

She knew she was nailed. It still didn't stop her from trying. "Is there something you can do for me?" she said.

'I can testify that you did not resist arrest.'

'What, after all we've been to each other? Or could have been?' She smiled, and it was like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. "Or still could be?' Her hands were tied, but she did what she could, shifting her feet, spreading her legs a little, and thrusting her chest and her pelvis in my direction. "I can do things to you that you've never even thought of." She sounded like a cat purring. 'And I will. Try me.'

She was good, I'll give her that: as good as I'd ever seen. Too bad it wasn't good enough. Maybe she shouldn't have told me that story.

I said, "I'm almost old enough to be your father, Parris."

'So spank me and send me to bed,' she said, turning it up full blast. "Or take me." She was desperate.

"That's not me," I said.

She watched my eyes for another second. Then she sighed, giving it up at last. "Okay . . ."

Five minutes later the car with her in it had driven off, but the scents of sweet sweat and flowers lingered. I thought about leaving, going to the office or going home.

I went back inside instead.

The bartender looked up from his paper as I reclaimed my stool. He cocked his head to the door. "What was that all about?"

"She murdered her boyfriend."

"Yeah? How?"

"Stabbed him. At least six times."

He raised an eyebrow. "Whaddya wanna bet the bastard had it coming," he said. He ambled over to the well. "I mean, they usually do, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "They usually do."

When he brought my drink, I asked for some quarters. I wanted to hear 'Back o' Town Blues' one more time. It was still early.

DALLIANCE AT SUNNYDALE

Barbara Collins

Henry hated Sunnydale. He wished he'd never let his wife of fifty-seven years talk him into moving there.

But Bernice had tricked him by calling Sunnydale a "retirement community" and "assisted-living apartments."

Bullcrap. No matter what newfangled names it went by these days, Sunnydale was still a nursing home—the last stop on the way to the grave—and a place Henry swore he'd never end up.

At the time, however, when Bernice approached Henry with a brochure printed on slick paper that showed large comfortable apartments, a cheerfully decorated dining room displaying delectable foods, and an attractive staff (especially the females) looking dedicated and eager to serve them, it seemed like a good idea. Bernice had rheumatoid arthritis, and he was recovering from a stroke.

Neither could climb the stairs anymore or do anything but the simplest of household tasks. So they sold their rambling house in the city and took up residence in the country.

But Sunnydale was not so sunny. Henry soon discovered. It was a dreary, sprawling, one-floor institution stuck out in the middle of nowhere—where no one came to visit, not even their grown children.

And who could blame them?

Bernice, on the other hand, loved Sunnydale. She told him many times how happy she was, content to live out her dying days there . . .

Henry only felt miserable.

And lonely.

As he shuffled out of the solitude of his tiny bedroom (they each had their own) and into the minuscule living room, he glanced at his wife, who was seated in the only recliner, her swollen legs up. She was wearing an old cotton housedress and matted, furry slippers. Her white hair—long ago, blond and shoulder length—was cut mannishly short, its texture as coarse as the slippers. Her face, once beautiful, was now a pasty, lumpy thing, eyes two shriveled up raisins disappearing into rising dough.

Despite her dilapidated appearance, however, he still did love Bernice—in a way. After all, at his age, he was no prize either. He could stand to lose a good fifty pounds. But at least he tried to stay well groomed, although his wife never seemed to notice.

Today, Bernice was doing what she did every day: watching a cable channel called TLC.

Once, Henry asked her what the initials stood for, and she told him it either meant The Learning Channel or Tender Loving Care, she wasn't sure.

He said *he* could use a little tender loving care, but she didn't hear him. Or pretended not to.

With some difficulty, Henry got his walker, which was stored in the entryway of their living quarters.

He paused and looked back at his wife.

"I'm going now," he said.

She nodded slightly, her eyes glued to the set, not interested in where he was headed.

Of course, how far could that be?

Henry's shoulders slumped, and he steered the walker, its small wheels squeaking, out their open front door and into the hallway.

He couldn't understand why anybody would find a show like that—about some strangers who come into your house and re

arrange the furniture—the least bit entertaining. What if you didn't like it? Or the other program his wife watched, about disfigured children getting their faces fixed. The other day Bernice insisted on telling him all about some boy who was born with only one eye. Henry was happy the little fella got another eyeball, but did he have to hear the gruesome details of the operation at dinnertime when he was trying to eat oyster stew?

Then there was another show Bernice liked, about birthing babies. Talk about embarrassing! He asked his wife why she cared about such things at her age, especially when she'd had three children herself, and she looked at him as if he had mush for brains and snapped, "Well, I didn't actually *see* what happened down there, now did I?"

Henry thought, *Why would you want to?* When *that* show came on (which was now), he made himself scarce.

Henry pushed the walker slowly along the scuffed up corridor, dragging his left leg, which hadn't recovered from the stroke yet. Tediously he passed more rooms belonging to other residents, sometimes he could hear muffled cries behind the closed doors of the really sick ones.

He shuffled by the dining room, where a nauseating conglomeration of smells wafted out, telling him that another detectable dinner was under way in the kitchen.

As Henry went by the nurse's station, two unattractive broads (that's how he thought of them) in stained white smocks, one as fat as the other was thin, were having an argument over the dosage a patient *should* have received that morning. The two women didn't seem to notice him.

Somewhat winded, Henry finally reached the apex of the outrageously expensive retirement community called Sunnydale, the recreation center.

Here, amid plastic flowers and uncomfortable furniture, those who could make it to the gray-painted room could watch even

more TV or exercise their feeble minds by playing the tattered board games or put together puzzles without all their pieces.

On this dreary afternoon, only a few residents were in the R.C.

A man Henry knew as Fritz sat in his wheelchair in a corner watching a football game on a small wall-mounted television set. The old gent's wife—Henry forgot her name—was probably watching the same channel as Bernice, forcing Fritz to flee.

In the center of the room, two other men—Edgar and Vernon, both widowers (the former had lupus, the latter a bad ticker)—were having a rollicking game of checkers. They looked like embalmed corpses.

There was one female in the room.

Margaret.

She had been incarcerated at Sunnydale about six months ago. A petite, slender widow, Margaret was about as good-looking as they came at her age, which he guessed to be around eighty. He had heard from Bernice—who was always catty about other women—that poor Margaret had been barren, and no children would ever visit her—as if theirs did.

The trim widow had been friendly to Henry, but pretty much stayed in her apartment, cooking her own meals (smart lady) instead of partaking in the sumptuous food provided by Sunnydale's non-hairnet-wearing cooking staff.

Margaret was setting up the Scrabble board on a card table in the corner of the room opposite the blaring television. She noticed Henry and smiled invitingly, showing lovely white teeth.

Henry felt a jolt of electricity shoot up his spine from his loins, and he made a beeline toward her as fast as his bum leg and squeaky walker would let him.

"Hello, Henry," Margaret said warmly, gazing up at him with velvety blue eyes that twinkled like stars in a midnight sky.

The board game with its many alphabet pieces was spread out on the table before her like a tribal wooden offering.

'Margaret,' he replied with a slight nod of his head.

"Oh, please . . . call me Maggie."

Alright then, Maggie. She certainly was a looker, with soft silver hair done up in a French twist.

'Would you like to play with me?' she asked with an impish smile on painted Betty Boop lips.

What a humdinger! 'Okay,' Henry said. He set his walker alongside the table next to her three-pronged cane and lowered himself into a folding chair.

"Do you remember how to . . . do it?" she asked, cocking her head coyishly to look at him.

Was the woman talking about Scrabble or something more suggestive? Or was his love-starved mind working overtime?

He decided to feel her out. 'It has been a while,' he said, carefully choosing his words, 'but I think it'll come back to me.'

"If you do it with me, it will,' she responded. Then asked, "Were you any good at it?"

Now he was sure she was flirting with him . . . the little minx.

Across the room, the TV erupted as someone made a touchdown.

Henry made his own forward pass, hoping to score. 'Well, Maggie,' he said slyly, 'how good I am at it depends on my partner.'

She seemed to find his answer amusing, a smile tickled her Kewpie-doll mouth.

'I think, Henry,' Maggie replied, "I'd like to find out just how good you are."

She passed out some alphabet pieces and announced, 'You go first."

Henry studied his wooden squares and, after a moment, spelled out the word ROMANCE, in the center of the board.

Maggie immediately used the 'E' from his word and went upward to make CUDDLE.

Then he took a 'D' and spelled DALLY.

As the supply of available letters dwindled the words got more risqué and they giggled like two kids discovering their body parts were different.

So Henry was surprised when Maggie suddenly announced that she wanted to quit. And she reached out and disturbed all the pieces.

He thought they were having fun — had he gone too far and offended her?

As Maggie stood and retrieved her three footed cane, a disappointed Henry struggled to his feet.

"I'm going back to my room," she told him.

"Okay."

"That's room 110."

"Uh-huh."

"Maybe you'd like to visit me sometime. Say — tonight after midnight?"

She gave him a wicked wink, leaving a shocked Henry standing—in more ways than one.

At a little before midnight, Henry was in the cramped bathroom of his so-called apartment.

Bernice was next door in her bedroom, sound asleep. He could hear her through the thin wall, snoring to beat the band.

He'd just taken a shower and shaved, and was rooting around in the medicine cabinet trying to find a bottle of cologne that he remembered one of the children had given him a few years ago for his birthday.

He finally located the bottle, still in its wrapper, beneath the bathroom sink. He opened the lid and sniffed. The cologne smelled okay, so he dabbed a little behind his ears.

Then Henry put the toilet seat down and sat and removed the tags on a new jogging outfit (Christmas, another of his children

which he'd never felt compelled to wear—he couldn't exactly go jogging.

Dressed, he returned to the mirror for a final inspection, feeling as giddy as he had on his first date, when he took a girl—not Bernice—smooching at a drive-in.

Satisfied with his appearance—he thought he looked more like seventy-three than eighty-three—Henry shut off the bathroom light. Holding on to the wall in the dark, dragging his left foot, he slowly made his way to the front door where his hot rod of a walker awaited him.

The walker looked a little beat-up—there were dings in the chrome, and the tread on the wheels was worn. He made a mental note to buy a newer model, one that went faster.

Quietly, cautiously, he opened the door and peered out into the hallway.

The dimly lit corridor was empty. Henry knew from past insomniac nights that the nurse on duty (the thin one) would be taking a cigarette break about now. He would have to shake a leg (and a bum one at that) to get to Maggie's room in the opposite corridor before the broad got back.

Henry cursed his paralyzed limb and the squeaking wheels of the walker. With every step, the hallway seemed to stretch on farther and farther—and he wondered if he should give up and turn back . . .

But the thought of spending time alone with the lovely Maggie spurred him on.

If you're not going to work, he told his left leg, *at least stay out of my way!*

A man on a mission, Henry was moving quicker now than he ever believed he could.

He passed the dining room, then the empty nurse's station on his right—and finally the recreation center on his left. He was en-

tering the opposite corridor when a voice boomed behind him, nearly giving poor Henry a heart attack.

'Hey, pops. Where do you think you're going?'

Clutching the walker, Henry turned his head to see Leroy, the security guard, approach. Big and burly and about as dim as the hall lighting, Leroy usually slept the night away in the staff's room.

Henry's squeaky wheels must have awakened him.

"I said," Leroy repeated, 'where do you think you're going?'

"My apartment?"

Leroy smirked. 'Which is? Or do you even know, old man?"

Henry counted on Leroy not knowing.

"Uh . . . 110."

"Well, all right, then, let's get going." The guard grabbed Henry roughly by one arm, propelling him and his walker along.

"Now stay in there,' Leroy warned, depositing Henry in front of Maggie's door. 'Or I'll report you." He poked Henry's chest. "Get it?"

"Got it,' Henry replied with a smile as Leroy turned on his heels.

Henry opened the door and guided his walker inside.

The living room was pitch-black and very quiet.

He frowned. Shouldn't there be a lamp on?

He had pictured Maggie, on his long journey down the corridor, waiting for him seductively on the couch, music playing softly from somewhere.

He felt foolish. Had he misunderstood her invitation?

As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he noticed a flickering of light coming from the open doorway of the single bedroom. It seemed to beckon him.

Excitement replaced apprehension, and Henry parked his walker next to Maggie's three-pronged cane in the entryway.

Carefully he headed toward the shaft of light, but immediately bumped into an end table.

"Henry?" a feeble voice called out from the bedroom.

"Yes. It's me."

He moved forward again more cautiously and at last arrived at the open door.

Maggie was in bed, propped up by several plump pillows, she was wearing a pink nightgown with lace trim, her shoulder-length silver hair caressing her shoulders.

A lavender-colored candle burned on the nightstand, emitting a scent of lilacs. Maggie looked lovely in its soft flickering light.

Henry stood awkwardly in the doorway, a nervous bridegroom on his wedding night.

"Come here," Maggie said with a reassuring smile. "You must be tired." She patted the bedspread next to her.

He approached and tentatively sat on the bed.

She leaned toward him and gently pushed him back against the pillows, then snuggled up to him. They stayed that way for a while—Maggie with her head on his shoulder, Henry on his back, one arm around her—watching the shadow of the candle's flame lick the ceiling.

Henry closed his eyes, enjoying the warmth of her body and the fresh smell of her hair.

He might have fallen asleep, he wasn't sure, but the next thing Henry felt was Maggie's soft small hand beneath his jogging shirt, massaging his chest.

Then her hand moved slowly downward, and he stiffened, yes, in more ways than one.

She began to caress his manhood, and Henry moaned with pleasure.

Then she tugged his slacks down . . . and when she took him into her warm, wet mouth, Henry gasped.

He couldn't believe what was happening!

Once, when he turned fifty, he begged Bernice to do such a thing, and she grudgingly agreed. But after a few minutes, Henry asked her to stop.

Too much teeth.

Now Maggie stopped.

Henry lifted on his elbows to give Maggie an appreciative smile—it was more than he had hoped for, and he was thankful for however briefly she serviced him.

But to his surprise (and delight!) Maggie turned away, then set her dentures on the nightstand, and returned to pleasing Henry, even better than before.

Henry lay back in ecstasy—no teeth at all.

Later, entwined in each other's arms, Henry said, "Our love making was a little one sided tonight, my darling."

She kissed his cheek. "Giving you pleasure, Henry gives me pleasure. That's all I care about."

Henry smiled broadly.

Why couldn't all women be like Maggie?

By the end of the week, Henry could scoot down to Maggie's room—with the help of a brand new walker—in half the amount of time it took him that first night. And to his amazement, his left leg was responding to all the exercise—he could even lead with it a little.

Maggie, he discovered on their second night together, had retained a nice firm body, breasts soft and round and hardly droopy at all. Oh, sure, there was some sagging here and there, a little tummy, some varicose veins—, but who cared? She was a goddess compared to Bernice, who was becoming a growing problem in his mind with each passing day. He wished he was married to Maggie, instead.

While Maggie seemed to enjoy a bit of tomfoolery, she preferred to give Henry oral sex.

Who was he to argue?

On their eighth night together, however, he found Maggie sobbing in her bedroom. By the light of the lavender candle she showed him a letter from her attorney that said her funds were depleted and she would have to leave the nursing home by the end of the month.

Seated on the edge of the bed, Henry held her until she had quieted down.

"I won't let you go," he said firmly.

"You have no choice," she sniffled. "I have no one . . . no other funds . . ."

"Hell . . . I'll pay for your room here."

Maggie shook her head, silver hair moving in gentle arches. "Your family would never allow it."

He realized that Maggie was right. His children handled their estate, paid all the bills. They would never understand his feelings for another woman.

"Oh, Henry," Maggie moaned, "just when I've found true love." She began to cry again. "What will become of me?"

Henry clutched her tighter. "I'll think of something."

"But what?"

He kissed her tear stained cheek. "I'll divorce Bernice and marry you, my sweet."

Maggie pulled away from him.

"Then how much money will you have?" she asked. "Enough for Bernice, *and* you and me?"

Henry thought about that. "No," he admitted, lowering his head. "There's barely enough for her and me."

"But . . . if she was gone . . ."

Henry straightened. "What do you mean?"

"I mean . . . I meant . . . *when* she is gone," Maggie said, mov

ing closer putting her arms around Henry, 'would there be enough money for you and me?

Henry nodded numbly.

Maggie sighed "Well, maybe something will happen to her . . . before the month is out."

'Yes he said her words sinking in taking root 'You never know . . ."

Maggie smiled and wiped away her tears Then she made love to him on the bed.

The next day while Bernice was watching TV Henry stayed in his bedroom thinking of ways she could 'accidentally' pass away.

He lay on the bed hands behind his head elbows splayed out his mind racing with possibilities

The first idea that came to Henry was that his wife could expire from taking too much of her rheumatoid arthritis medication The staff at Sunnydale was always making stupid mistakes when it came to administering the residents prescriptions, and an accidental overdose could easily be blamed on them But unfortunately he realized Bernice took charge of her own medicine rather than pay the extra cost of having a nurse tend to her daily

It would seem highly unlikely his wife would make such a blunder on her own.

And even if she did happen to take too much medication, how much would be enough to kill her? The last thing Henry wanted was for Bernice to become a comatose vegetable needing round the clock care, running through their money even faster.

Henry stared at the ceiling

What if he thought she fell in the tub cracked her head, and drowned? He could probably make that happen

But then, Bernice always took a shower, sitting on a silly little stool while she sponged herself off

If he whacked her from behind with, say, his heavy orthopedic shoe—someone might question why the drain was closed, allowing the tub to fill up.

Henry sighed. This wasn't going to be easy.

By midevening, when he still hadn't come up with a plan, a frustrated Henry went into his wife's bedroom to say good night to her as he usually did.

She was asleep already, on her back, snoring loudly, laboredly.

He thought, *Someone should put her out of her misery*, and that was when the solution came to him.

Henry remembered that movie about a nuthouse where one of the inmates suffocated Jack Nicholson with a pillow because Nicholson had part of his brain taken away.

It occurred to Henry that Bernice had only half of a brain these days. She was no good to anyone—not him or even herself. She was just a decomposing body taking up space.

And hadn't she told him she wanted to stay at Sunnydale until her dying day? He would give Bernice her wish.

Henry took the extra pillow on the bed, placed it over his wife's face, and pressed down firmly.

She struggled a bit. But Henry was strong, and after a few minutes her body went limp.

He kept the pillow in place for a while longer, just to be sure. Then he removed it.

Her face had already turned blue.

He checked for a pulse in her neck and found none.

Satisfied that she was gone, Henry turned her over so that she was facedown in one of the pillows, making it look like she had smothered in her sleep.

In the morning he would discover her body and react with the appropriate sadness, though no such emotion touched him even remotely now.

He left the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

Was it so wrong to want a little bit of happiness in the waning years of his life?

Henry didn't think so.

Maggie lit the scented candle on the nightstand. It was a little before midnight and she expected Henry to be along soon. She fluffed up the pillows and lay back in bed, pulling the white sheet up modestly around her nude body.

Maggie was proud of her figure. She weighed nearly the same at age eighty-one that she had at eighteen: a trim ninety-five pounds. What other woman her age could boast such a thing who wasn't dying of some disease or other?

She was happy that Henry found her attractive and wanted to marry her. She desperately needed someone to take care of her, now that financial ruin was at hand.

Henry just *had* to come through for her. Otherwise, she would be moved to the county home, which was little more than a snake pit.

Before Henry, Maggie had tried to attract some of the other men at Sunnydale—easier prey because they were already widowers—but none of them could be lured by sex. Edgar was afraid that he might have a heart attack. Vernon, she found out after nearly dislocating her jaw, was impotent.

But Henry, oh Henry—*he* was interested in sex. (She herself had been dead down there since menopause.)

Maggie didn't mind giving Henry—or any man—sex, as long as it led somewhere. After she had hooked Henry, however, she would soon put a stop to his active libido.

Maggie heard him out in the living room, and after a moment he appeared in the doorway.

Even by the faint light of the candle, she could see that his face was flushed.

"Henry? What is it?"

He came to the bed and gathered her in his arms.

"Maggie . . . will you marry me?" he asked, his breath coming in quick, sharp spurts.

"You know I would, Henry," she told him, caressing his face with one hand, "if you were free."

He smiled conspiratorially. "I *am* free, my darling."

"You . . . you mean . . . ?"

"Yes. She's dead."

"But . . . but how?"

"It would be better if you didn't know the details," he replied.

Maggie nodded slowly. "Yes, I agree."

She had already thought about what she would do if things went awry. After all, she had never asked Henry directly to kill his wife. He had come to that decision on his own.

Maggie would tell the authorities that he had become obsessed with her—like in one of those cable TV movies—and came to her room and forced her to have sex. If she told anyone he'd said, he would kill her.

Anyway, some such story.

Henry kissed her full on the mouth, his tongue tickling hers, and she pretended to respond.

When their lips parted, she asked sweetly, "Would you like me to . . . ?" Her hand slipped inside his pants.

"No. Tonight I want to make love to you."

"All right, Henry." She would provide the appropriate oohs and aaahs this time.

Henry mounted her, and she moaned accordingly.

But she was so tight and dry that intercourse was painful. And Henry was so damn heavy!

That was why she preferred giving him head—what a disgusting way of putting it!—which was no more bothersome than suck

ing on a big thumb until some tiny bit of goo oozed out, that she couldn't taste nowadays, anyway.

She used the time to think about other, more pleasant things, like what her life would be like with money.

Henry was grinding away on top of her, working himself up into a sweat. Each thrust seemed to knock the wind out of Maggie, and she lay still, hoping the end would come soon.

Then at last it came. Henry shuddered and collapsed.

"Henry? Could you please get off?" she said, finding it difficult to speak. "You're hurting me."

But Henry didn't move, remaining sprawled on top of her.

Maggie was sure he was dead, and panic set in. She struggled to get out from under him. But he was too heavy for her small, frail body, pinning her down like a big fallen tree.

Her breathing became short and labored. She could not cry out. She felt soon that her lungs would collapse under the crush of Henry's lifeless body.

With her last orgasmic breaths, Maggie watched the candle's white flame flickering on the bedroom ceiling, shadows dancing there, swaying romantically.

THE IBERVILLE MISTRESS

O'Neil De Noux

My husband is seeing another woman. Catherine LaVanchy's bright green eyes stare intently at me and I can't help thinking, *What kind of man runs around on a beautiful woman like this?*

I know the old saying *if you have steak every night, you want hamburger once in a while*, but we're talking filet mignon here. Catherine is prime-cut female.

Sitting across my old mahogany desk in her trim tan skirt suit, dark brown hair curled on her shoulders, she looks so much like Hedy Lamarr, even down to the dark red lipstick, it sends a chill through me. I catch a whiff of her perfume, sweet and expensive smelling, probably Chanel, and nervously run my fingers through my own dark brown hair.

"Mr. Cave, I think he's keeping a mistress." Catherine's voice is soft and near cracking as she breathes between quick sentences. "On Iberville Street. In a Creole town house. Upstairs apartment."

She passes a paper to me with the address 813B Iberville. I put it next to my notepad and pick up my fountain pen.

"Please call me Lucien. What's your husband's name?"

"Martin LaVanchy, IV. He's with Skinner, North, and Wagner. A partner."

I focus my Mediterranean brown eyes on hers and try not to show I'm liking this more and more. When she called me earlier, I hated the thought of my first case as a private investigator being

a divorce case, but seeing her and the promise of nailing a lawyer sends another shiver through me.

"Martin is a wealthy man and can easily afford keeping a mistress." Catherine sits more erect, her ample chest rising. She's nicely endowed for a petite woman, very nicely. "He comes from old money."

That partially explains it. The old New Orleans tradition, from the quadroon days when wealthy men kept their African mistresses in neat homes in Treme, while their wives stayed uptown with the children. Back in the nineteenth century it was common, but this is 1947.

"How long have you been married?"

"Two years. No children." She lets out a long breath. "Thankfully."

Being a southern boy, I'm too polite to ask her age, but she has to be a couple years younger than me, probably twenty-five or -six. Her eyes become wet as she keeps staring at me, and the look on her lovely face tells me she's facing up to a great failure in her life.

I do want to nail this bastard. Almost as much as I want to comfort his wife. The Spaniard in me wants his ass. The Frenchman in me wants hers. It's a nice combination, being half-and-half, fiery Spanish and seductive French. Keeps life interesting.

Catherine opens her purse and pulls out a handkerchief and wipes her eyes. She withdraws a white envelope and places it on the desk. "I doubled what you told me you needed as a retainer. There's a picture of Martin inside, too, and a sheet with our address and telephone number." She takes in a deep breath, firming up her chin. "Can you start today? He meets her at lunchtime."

"Sure." I play out my last hunch. "If you don't mind me asking, what is your maiden name?"

"Cortez. But my mother was French. a Landry,' she tells me, and I feel yet another chill.

Shortly before eleven, I step out of my building here in the low rent lower end of the French Quarter and put on my sunglasses. It's a bright autumn day in the mid eighties, and the neighborhood boys are playing football in Cabrini Playground across narrow Barracks Street.

My office, on the first floor of 909 Barracks, is directly below my apartment, in a gray two-story building with a black lacework balcony wrapping around the corner to Dauphine Street. Climbing into my gray prewar, 1940 De Soto coach, I lay my camera on the seat. I'd thought about changing out of my best suit, the navy-blue Hart, Schaffner and Marx I'd put on after hearing Catherine's soft voice on the phone, but figured I look less like a crook in a nice suit while sitting in a car on surveillance.

It takes me less than ten minutes to set up on Iberville Street, just down from the two-story double Creole town house, which is sandwiched among seven other town houses. Typically the houses are up against the sidewalk, with narrow passages between them to their rear patios. The town houses at either end of the line are businesses now: one a stationery shop, the other selling leather goods. I'm parked across the street, at the rear of D. H. Holmes Department Store. This part of the upper French Quarter is evolving into a business section only a block away from the CBD and busy Canal Street.

Pulling out Martin's picture, I catch a hint of Catherine's perfume again. He has a strong chin, deep-set eyes, and salt and pepper hair. He's pushing forty. I can tell he's full of himself by the way he smiles confidently at the camera.

He's also punctual. At noon he parks his silver Cadillac directly across from the town house. He's in a tailored brown suit

and carries a matching attache case. He's tall, about my height, six feet even. I pull up my Leica and focus on the town house. The door on the right side opens before he reaches it, and a pretty brunet lets him in with a kiss on his cheek. I snap a picture.

Exactly one hour later I get another picture as old Martin leaves, still with his attaché case. I spot a movement on the second-floor balcony of the town house and train my camera as the woman steps into the open French doors. She stands in the doorway in a white bra and panties. I focus and snap another picture and another as she leans forward to watch the Cadillac drive away.

She's also petite with a heavy chest. Skin as pale as Catherine's, she looks a little taller and maybe a little younger from this distance. She goes back inside, closing the door, and I can't help wondering why a man cheats on his wife with a woman who looks like her. Why not a blonde or a redhead?

Sitting back, I wait for her to leave. Need to prove they were alone. Hope this isn't an all-nighter. I should have eaten something.

Lucky for me, the woman comes out two hours later. She wears a smart blue dress and walks away from me, pocketbook tucked beneath her arm. I step over to the town house and ring the bell twice, knock on the door once, then leave.

There's a note under my office door that reads "Call me! C. L."

I dial Catherine's number and she answers in the middle of the first ring.

As I tell her what happened, I hear her breathing on the other end of the line. She's upset, so I put it as delicately as I can, giving only the pertinent details.

In her underclothes? Her voice falls away and I listen to her breathing for half a minute before she tells me she wants to catch them again. Tomorrow.

"I want more than enough evidence when we get to court."

Sounds logical to me.

And, Lucien,' her voice rises, 'you've been a great help.' And she hangs up and I realize there was more in the tone of her voice than what she said. The attraction I felt when staring across my desk at those green eyes wasn't my male imagination.

Leaning back in my high back chair, I wonder why she didn't ask what the other woman looks like. Maybe she knows. Maybe she's seen her. Or maybe she doesn't want to know.

While shaving the next morning, I realize I need a better plan than sitting in my car two days in a row. So I put my camera, telephoto lens, and extra film in my attaché case, go to Iberville Street early and park two blocks away. Yesterday, I noticed a For Rent sign in a town house next to D. H. Holmes, near the end of the block. I talk the landlady into renting the room to me for the rest of the week. The rent doesn't even put a dent in Catherine's advance.

By ten A.M. I'm set up across the street, the French doors of my balcony partially open, sitting in an easy chair ten feet inside the dark apartment, Leica at the ready. Shoulda brought a book or the newspaper to read. Leaning back, I make myself comfortable.

At ten thirty the mistress arrives in a maroon dress, lets herself in, and goes upstairs, opening the French doors. I focus on them and wait. When she returns a half hour later, she's in bra and panties again and I squeeze off two pictures before she closes the door.

At noon the Cadillac pulls up and Martin exits, carrying his attaché case again. He wears a silver suit today. The mistress, back in her maroon frock, lets him in with a peck on the cheek. I get pictures.

At one o'clock Martin leaves, taking an extra minute to put his case in the trunk. I snap pictures of him climbing in and driving off.

Looking back up at her balcony, I wait. She doesn't disappoint me, opening her French doors. I train my Leica on the doors and she steps into the doorway, stark naked, turning her face up to the sun. I take a picture before she moves back inside.

She leaves the doors open, so I change rolls quickly, snapping on my telephoto lens. I refocus just as she does it again, stepping naked into the doorway, face turned toward the sun. Her full breasts are nicely oversize for such a petite woman and her dark pubic bush shines in the bright sunlight, just like her dark hair flowing past her shoulders. I carefully snap five pictures before she goes back inside.

"She left two hours later," I tell my friend Eddie Billiot as he puts the rolls of film in the dryer at the New Orleans Police photo lab. Short and stocky with black hair and mustache, my old partner from the Third Precinct grins at me. "I'm making a set for me, you know."

I'd expected as much when I told him I wanted two sets of prints, one for my client and one for me. I follow him into the darkroom and watch the images float up in the developing trays. He makes neat five-by-seven prints.

He makes a yummy sound as we both stare at the image of the naked mistress.

"Aren't you glad you followed my advice and bought high-speed film?"

I tell him yes. Don't mention I'm also glad he transferred to the lab. Easiest place in the world for an ex-cop to get nude pictures developed.

In my office at five o'clock, Catherine wears another skirt suit, this one a deep purple. Standing next to me, she looks down at

the pictures I've laid out on my desk, and I catch the scent of her perfume again.

She likes to pose in her panties, doesn't she?' Her voice is even, with no hint of anger.

Actually'—I pull one of the nudes from my coat pocket she stood in her balcony door with nothing on."

The green eyes look up at me and blink.

"You want to see the picture?"

She nods and I hand it to her and she holds it for a moment before letting it drop on the desk

I think,' she says, this'll be enough for my lawyer."

Catherine opens her purse and asks how much she owes me

"Nothing."

She starts scooping up the pictures and tells me she needs the negatives, too, as I move around to my chair

I usually keep the negatives. To keep the chain of evidence secure."

She gives me a wide-eyed look 'My lawyer told me to get the negatives."

"What's his name?"

She brushes her hair from her face "I can't tell you that right now."

After tucking the photos into her purse she reaches her hand out So I open the side drawer of my desk and dig out the envelope with the negatives It doesn't contain the negatives from the second roll those last five carefully focused nudes. Those negatives are with my set of prints upstairs in my apartment.

The rain starts around seven P.M. just as I'm cleaning up from my homemade dinner, a BLT sandwich and fries I open the French doors of my balcony and watch the rain pelt the tile roofs

of the Quarter. It comes in waves, big fat rain, so I close the door, pour myself a Scotch, and turn on the radio, just in time for *NBC Presents: Short Story*. A baritone voice announces tonight's feature is Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher."

Two Scotches later, just as the House of Usher sinks into the 'deep and dark tarn,' my phone rings.

It's Catherine and she's crying.

It takes a while for me to get it out of her. She confronted Martin and left him. She's at the Roosevelt Hotel and wants me to come over.

'I don't want to be alone tonight.'

Neither do I. Taking in a deep breath, I have to say it. "Your lawyer should have told you to kick him out. Change the locks when he goes to work."

Her lawyer's a real douche bag.

'It's Martin's house.' She lets out a sob and I'm hooked. 'I'll be right there.' Before leaving, I reheat what's left in my coffeepot from this morning and down a strong cup of joe to clear the Scotch away.

I gently tap on the door of room 202. I have to rap twice before Catherine opens the door and stands there in a shape-hugging dark green dress with her eye makeup running and her mocha lipstick streaked.

'I know," she cries. "I look like a raccoon." She turns and hurries back through the room into the bathroom.

I close the door on my way in. The room is bigger than most hotel rooms. It has a double bed, two oak end tables with matching chest of drawers, and what's probably a closet across the room. It smells of her perfume.

'Can I get you a drink?' Catherine comes out with her face made up and steps to the bottle of bourbon on the chest of draw-

ers. She grabs ice cubes from the bucket next to the bottle and drops them in her drink, which is half filled.

"No thanks."

Catherine sits on the bed and kicks off her black high heels.

"I realize you don't want to tell me your lawyer's name. But has he talked to you about alimony?"

She nods as she drinks, finishing half her bourbon in one swallow. She shivers and tells me Martin won't even miss the alimony. Her voice is angry. "Won't miss me or the money."

She finishes her bourbon and puts the glass on the end table, steps back to me, and says, "Can you help me with my dress?"

Can I help you? Jesus!

She turns her back to me and holds up her hair. I unzip her dress down to the top of her white half-slip. She steps out of her dress and slip, tossing them on the bed.

"Can you get my bra?"

Usually I'm on the other side, with the woman in a wrestling hold. Unfastening a bra from the rear is much easier. Catherine tosses the bra atop her dress, turns, and looks me in the eyes. Those big green eyes are looking for something in mine, and I hope it's there. She smiles slightly and closes her eyes, raising her hands behind her head, as if she's posing.

My gaze moves down to her chest, to those full breasts, those light pink areolas and those pointed nipples. Her chest rises with her breathing. So does mine. Up close, her perfume is nearly intoxicating.

With her eyes still closed, Catherine unfastens her garter belt and lets it fall, with her stockings, to the carpet. She pushes her white panties off and kicks them away and stands there, letting me gaze at her. She does a slow turn and climbs onto the bed, shoving her dress and bra to the floor. She lies on her back, those green eyes searing into mine.

Jesus! I'm only human.

I undress quickly, but not too quickly. Don't want to seem overanxious, although I'm more than ready. I make love to this beautiful, lonely wife. Frenzied at first, she gasps and cries out and I grunt and kiss her lips over and over.

Then we do it again to make sure we got it right. The second time is softer and deeper and more loving. The affection in her eyes is startling and we kiss more than I've ever kissed another woman.

After, as I roll onto my back and she curls up against my side, I can't help saying it aloud.

"Your husband's a moron."

I can't be sure, but I think she's crying softly.

The moron bursts into my office the following morning, his face contorted, a brown envelope in his left hand that he waves menacingly at me as he storms to my desk. He's in another brown suit, blue tie loosened.

I pull my feet off my desk as he shouts. "Where is she?"

I just stare at him, my jaw fixed, my fists ready.

"Where is she?" He slams the envelope on my desk.

I heard you the first time, Counselor. My voice is low and emotionless.

He pulls pictures from the envelope and shoves them across the desk. I glance down and feel my stomach bottom out. They aren't the clearest pictures. Whoever took them must have been in the closet last night, but you can tell it's Catherine and me.

"You unmitigated bastard!" Martin starts around my desk. "You send this pornography to me!" He stops just out of punching range. "Where is my wife?"

I turn my left shoulder to him and snarl. "Step closer and you'll need bridgework." My fists are clenched and ready.

He raises a shaky right index finger. "You think you're getting money from me, you're nuts. I'll go to the police first.

Money? Are you completely insane?"

Martin backs away. "You can try to blackmail me, but you won't get any money." He reaches over and snatches the pictures.

I put my hands on my desk as he backs away.

"I didn't send those pictures to you and I don't blackmail anyone, jackass!"

He points his chin at me. "Stay away from my wife."

"Go to hell!"

He leaves, kicking the door, and I don't know why the glass doesn't shatter.

I immediately dig my leather holster from my desk drawer and thread it through my belt, leaving it at the small of my back. I shove my .38 Smith & Wesson snub-nose into it. Throwing on my lightweight blue blazer, I step outside just as Martin's Cadillac runs the stop sign up at Rampart Street. He's moving fast, so I jump in my De Soto and head after him.

He makes a left on Rampart and may be heading to the Roosevelt or back to Skinner, North, and Wagner in the Hibernia Bank Building. He crosses Canal and then Gravier Street and keeps going. I turn left on Gravier and work my way down to Baronne Street and the Roosevelt Hotel.

Catherine checked out this morning. Can't believe she used her maiden name, like her husband couldn't figure that out.

Thinking she might call, I head back to my office. From Rampart I turn left on Iberville to pass the mistress's on my way home, and Martin's Cadillac is parked out front. He sure got here fast.

I set up down the street and wait. A half hour later I walk to the corner of Dauphine and use the pay phone in case Catherine went home for clothes or something. No answer.

It isn't long before Martin leaves the apartment in a big hurry. Don't see the mistress, but I have to follow him. If he finds Catherine, she's gonna be in big trouble.

He drives quickly, taking Royal to Canal up to Claiborne,

heading uptown. Twenty minutes later I catch the red light at Napoleon Avenue. He ran the yellow light, hanging a right. Figuring he's heading to their house on Fontainebleau, I drive straight there and find his car parked in the circular drive of a white three-story Greek Revival semimansion with galleries along the first and second floors. I pull out the paper with Catherine's address and it's their house all right.

I drive past and set up across the neutral ground (that's what we call medians in New Orleans) beneath a towering oak. The narrow neutral ground is dotted with camellia bushes and small palm trees, but I have a perfect line of view to the front of the house.

Just before eleven, a light blue Cadillac parks behind Martin's. Catherine climbs out the driver's side and another woman exits the passenger side. It's the mistress, in an appropriate red dress. Catherine's in a white dress. She leads the way to the front door and starts to open it with a key, when Martin yanks it open. Both women take a step back.

I'm out of my car, crossing the neutral ground.

Martin's in his shirtsleeves, no tie. I hear loud voices. The mistress moves forward, kisses Martin on the cheek, and stands between him and Catherine, who slips into the house.

The door closes as I reach their side of the street. I stop behind another oak and peek at the house.

What the hell do I do?

What the hell's going on?

My heart thunders in my chest as I stand there wondering.

There's a sharp *crack*, unmistakably a gunshot, followed by five more in quick succession. Pulling out my .38, I race for the door. Reaching it, I try the knob and it's unlocked. I slip into a marble foyer and cock my revolver. There's a wide staircase straight ahead, what looks like a dining room to my right and a study to my left, where I hear a sob.

I peek in and Catherine's just inside, a snub-nosed .38 Colt

in her right hand, her face streaked with blood. Martin lies on the carpet ten feet in front of her. The mistress is sprawled across a sofa, to Catherine's right.

After easing in, I slip up to Catherine and take the gun from her. She blinks at me and says, He hit me again.

The room stinks of burned cordite and blood. I slip her gun into my pants and check out the mistress. No visible gunshot wounds. She's breathing okay. She's even prettier up close.

"Did you shoot her?"

"No." Catherine starts sobbing. "She fainted."

I check Martin. He's not breathing. I hold my fingers against his carotid artery. Dead. She put all six shots in his chest. Looking up at Catherine, I ask, "Whose gun?"

She has her hands in front of her face. I guide her to the other sofa in the study and sit her down. I have to pull her hands away from her face.

"Whose gun?" I repeat.

She answers between sobs. "It's . . . his . . . gun. I took it . . . from . . . nightstand . . . when I left."

I step over to a nearby desk, pick up the phone, and call the police.

I manage to get Catherine to stop sobbing before the police arrive, just as the mistress starts coming to.

Don't know the two uniforms who arrive first, but they know enough to separate us: one leading me outside to wait for the detectives. Not ten minutes later, a black prowl car parks in front of the house and two men exit.

Lieutenant Frenchy Capdeville, in a baggy blue suit, heads for me, his head shaking. He's a good five inches shorter than me and has curly black hair and a matching, pencil-thin Zorro mustache. If Ernie Kovacs ever needs a double, Frenchy's his man. He pulls the cigarette from his mouth and flicks it to the driveway, sparks flying.

The other detective has a regrettably familiar face. Jimmy Hays, built like a fireplug with stubby arms and a pug ugly face, bounds up and reaches out to grab my coat. Frenchy cuts him off.

"Go inside," Frenchy tells him.

Hays narrows his dull gray eyes and spits next to my feet before going in.

Frenchy fires up another Camel. "What's it between you two?"

I knocked him out once for shooting a dog. That was back when we were rookies at the Third Precinct.

Frenchy blows out a cloud of smoke and says, "Talk to me."

I tell him how it went down, leaving nothing out, not even the part in the Roosevelt. He's the best homicide detective in the city. He'll find out.

"Give me the gun."

I pull it out carefully, by the muzzle, and hand it to Frenchy.

"Gimme your roscoe, too."

I hand him my gun. He sniffs the barrel.

Another prowl car pulls up and another familiar face. Detective Willie Spade, climbs out. Frenchy waves him forward and tells him to take me to the Detective Bureau.

About an inch smaller than me with short carrot red hair and too many freckles to count. Spade has deep set brown eyes. I move to him and ask if it's all right if I follow him, not leave my car behind.

"Drive both of us." Spade waves his partner over, a tall dick I've never seen, and tells him what's up.

After running a paraffin test on me, to see if I fired a gun lately, Spade calls for the crime lab to come fetch and analyze the test. For the next two hours, Spade and I sit in the Homicide Squad room, on the second floor of the concrete Criminal Courts Building, Tulane and Broad Street. We reminisce about old times.

working the Third Precinct, before the war, especially the night shift. Mostly we talk about women. Spade is partial to whores. The trampier the woman, the more Spade likes her.

As I'm finishing my third cup of coffee, Spade tells me about a gang bang he and three other cops fucked into. Jimmy Hays enters and Spade's story fades.

"What's he doing out here?" Hays kicks a chair as he passes. "Put him in an interview room."

I don't need Spade to lead me. I go on my own into one of the tiny rooms with its square folding table and two chairs. Hays kicks the door closed on me.

I don't have to wait long for the door to open and Frenchy nods me out. Hays, fuming as he stands behind Frenchy, glares at me as I pass. Spade pulls a chair out for me at the conference table near the coffeepot, which reeks of stale java.

Frenchy pulls up a chair next to me and lays out the pictures from the Roosevelt. "Not only do you make more money than we do, you get fringe benefits, too."

Spade scoops up the pictures and stammers. "Damn!"

Frenchy Zippos another cigarette. Hays moves to the far side of the table, giving me the big, bad stare.

"The shooting looks justifiable," Frenchy declares. "Precinct boys tell me they've been out there before. Seems the respectable attorney was a well-practiced wife-beater." He lets out a long stream of smoke. "We ran a paraffin test on the wife. Confirms she fired the weapon, as you said." He shoves a handwritten crime lab report in front of me. "You, however, didn't fire a weapon. And her sister confirms the whole story."

It takes a second. "Sister?!"

"The other woman in the house." Frenchy stands and stretches. "The wife's sister."

"Whoa!" Spade howls as he looks at another view of Catherine and me.

I sit back and try to wipe the surprise from my face. Frenchy puts my gun on the table.

Damn! Spade snaps up another picture.

"Where are you going with those pictures?" Frenchy calls out.

Spade turns and says, "Bathroom. It only be a minute."

Frenchy snatches the pictures from Spade. He nods at me and tells Spade, "Take his statement."

Turning back to me, Frenchy adds, "You can go after. Just don't go near the wife. She doesn't want to see you again." He takes a step and tells me, over his shoulder, "We have men outside her house, capeesh?"

On my way home, I stop on Iberville Street and knock on the mistress's door. I ring the bell and knock again. As I turn to leave, the door of 813A, the other half of the town house, opens and a gray-haired woman peers out.

"You here about the apartment?"

"Uh, sure."

The woman steps out with a key in her hand. She's not five feet tall and wears a pink housecoat. "Tenant moved out yesterday."

Stepping back, I notice a small sign in her window. "Apartment for Rent."

She lets me into the mistress's apartment, into a modestly furnished living room, then to the rear kitchen.

"There are two bedrooms upstairs," she says, leading me up the stairs. "Young people nowadays," she adds.

"What about them?"

"They don't believe in responsibility, suddenly moving out. At least the place is clean."

The master bedroom is in front with the French doors and balcony. There's a bathroom between the two bedrooms. There's an odd smell in it, like acid.

"That's strange." The woman stops and points to the only window in the bathroom, which is painted black. I look around and spot weather stripping on the bathroom door. It was a darkroom.

I feel the pieces falling into place.

They sure played me, didn't they?

In my apartment I pull out my extra set of the pictures from Iberville Street, grab one of the mistress-sister kissing Martin and one of the naked mistress-sister on her balcony. I slip them into an envelope, put Catherine's address on the outside and a note inside that reads, "Call me!"

I walk to the taxi stand up on Rampart and pick out the biggest cabbie, a huge man with a tattoo of a parachute with wings on his arm. He's an airborne veteran. I pull him aside and tell him I was a Ranger in Italy, mentioning Monte Cassino. He nods and tells me he was with the 82nd Airborne at Ste. Mere Eglise. Damn!

I offer him a ten-spot to put the envelope in Catherine La Vanchy's hand.

He says no problem.

"Watch out for cops outside her house."

He says no problem.

Sitting in my easy chair, facing the door to my apartment, I sip my Scotch rocks and wait for her. I close my eyes and can almost feel her moving beneath me. I can see the affection in those green eyes when we made love, how her pretty face glowed with the passion.

Maybe she'll call, but I've a gut feeling she'll come—for the pictures.

When the doorbell rings at nine o'clock, I'm on my third

Scotch. Cracking open my apartment door, I push the downstairs buzzer and hear the door open and shut. I look down at the top of her head as she starts up the stairs. I step back in and freshen my Scotch.

The door swings open and the sister-mistress stares at me from the doorway. She's in a form fitting black dress with blue piping, black heels, and matching gloves. Her pouty lips are painted a deep crimson, her eyes even more intensely green than her sister's. She's prettier, too, if that's possible. Younger. That's probably it.

I step up to her and take her purse from her arm, open it, and look through it.

"What are you looking for?" She has a silvery, seductive voice.

"Another gun. Where's Catherine?"

She slips into my living room and turns back to me. "The pictures are of me." She wears the same perfume and suddenly I wish I hadn't drunk so much. "Lucien, isn't it?" Her voice deepens. "I'm Connie."

Crossing to the sofa, she peels off her gloves and drops them on my coffee table. I close the door and move toward her, watching as she looks up at me and says, "How much money do you want?"

"None." I lift my glass. "Can I get you a drink?"

"You don't want money?"

"That's what you and your sister were after. Alimony wouldn't be enough, but *all* his money would, right?"

Connie puts a hand on her hip as I go for my bottle of Johnnie Walker Red Label. "He was too good a lawyer for my sister to get much alimony." Her voice has that teacher-man patronizing tone, as if I'm a child. "He was too well connected to every judge in town."

I put the bottle and my empty glass down. "It's coffee I need right now."

"You know how it is," she says.

'I know he wasn't screwing you. Not with the way you kissed him on the cheek every time you saw him. Like he was a cousin or brother in law, not a lover. Y'all set me up and used me to get him angry enough to beat her so she could kill him.

Her eyes don't react.

"The only weak link in your plan is me." I point to the rest of the pictures from Iberville piled on my coffee table. "I can put you on Iberville Street, can put it all together for the D.A."

I have to admit she remains cool, those green eyes showing not a hint of worry.

"If you don't want money, then what do you want?"

I'm suddenly on her, scooping her up and holding her close. She used me and I'm going to use her.

There's no fear in her eyes, just a searching look, a probing. I let her go and take a step back. She comes to me, she gets the pictures, negatives, everything.

I sit on the sofa. She stands there for a long minute, still staring at me.

"You won't turn us in?"

Without these pictures, I've got nothing. Man beats his wife and gets what he deserved. I just want you and Catherine to know I know what you did. *And* I want her." I raise my index finger. "For one more night, like it was at the Roosevelt. Maybe it's the liquor talking, but I mean it."

A subtle change comes over her face. It's less confident, less intense. Her eyes become wider as she kicks off her heels and reaches around to unzip her dress.

"They're my pictures," she says in a husky tone. "Keep 'em. I didn't come for the pictures, anyway."

She climbs out of her dress and stands for a moment in her white bra and panties. "No stockings tonight."

"You were never a weak link in our plan," she says. "You, we can handle."

She unfastens her bra and lets it drop, freeing those full, luscious breasts.

"I watched you from the closet," she says as she climbs out of her panties and stands naked in front of me. "No, I didn't come for the pictures at all."

She moves to me languidly like a cat. She presses her hands against my shoulders and moves her face close to mine.

"I came for this."

And I'm suddenly sober and ready to be used again.

SERVICE

Gary Lovisi

I first saw her in this low-lite strip club on the boulevard. She was a dancer, but... You see, Clarise only danced in the private back room. She did special parties, but to see her you would never, *ever* think she was any kind of dancer. Especially not a sex dancer. She was young then, and beautiful, and just over three hundred pounds of pulsating female flesh. And with all that weight she still moved like a cat, every pound of flesh quivering, straining, shaking over every inch of her sweat-glistened skin. Her fat bounced obscenely, lustfully. It shook, it beckoned. She was disgusting. At first I couldn't look at her.

Then I couldn't look away.

I used to go every night after that to see Clarise dance. I know I was obsessed with her largeness. I was like a tiny moon revolving around her massive planet-sized body, and I loved it and she knew it. I would stare at her jiggling flesh, drinking the hot odor of her woman sweat rolling off her body in waves as she gyrated before me. There was the look of fire in her eyes. When she finally stripped down to her G-string, I found myself fighting with other men in the room to touch her, to thrust bills between her massive private parts. She deftly took the dollars and placed them gently under her ponderous breasts or between the lips of her vagina, where the bills stayed put as if in a vault.

Thinking about it now as I sit here in this cell, I don't know why I got into it with her. I just did. I went there every night after work, elbow-to-elbow with all the other chubby chasers and sos

ers in the place, watching Clarise in amazement. We were like jackals at a feast, each of us attuned to her every move as she danced. She was incredible. Standing above me on the stage, her huge body defiant, her foul language, taunting obscene gestures, the slaps and rants of her rage. The odor that abounded from her was terrible, and at the same time . . . intriguing.

I remember when Bud and Joe at work first took me there, saying I needed some adult entertainment to take my mind off all the numbers in my head. I was good at numbers, being an accountant.

'And besides,' Bud told me, 'the fat chick that dances in the back room is a fucking laugh riot.'

Maybe, but not for me. For me she was beautiful, the most sexual woman I had ever seen in my life. People say a three hundred-pound woman cannot be sexy. Well, you've never seen Clarise, never felt the stage moan under her weight as she rocked back and forth like an elephant in heat, dancing to the howls of dozens of lust crazed admirers. I can't explain it. It's not healthy. It's not supposed to happen this way. In our culture of anorexic, toothpick thin models or big breasted blond amazons, short and fat is not supposed to be what a man wants. Clarise's gross obesity was beyond anything most men would ever consider sexy. But it was more than that. Clarise was special. She had a way of pressing the right buttons on a certain type of man. From the first day I saw her, I knew that I was that type of man. I knew that I had to find some way to meet her.

It was a mysterious thing to me because the night that I finally got up the balls to speak to Clarise . . . to tell her I'd picked her out of all the women I'd ever seen as the most sexual and the most beautiful . . . she seemed to have picked me out of the crowd of her admirers. She beckoned me to come to her after her last set.

When I saw her afterward, she was picking up her dirty,

soiled clothes, ringed with sweat and odor. She rolled them into a balled up handful, looked at me, and threw her dirty clothes in my face, saying, "Take these and follow me out back."

I grabbed each item greedily. They smelled of sweat and other rank odors, from her underarms, her genital area, her buttocks. I held them tightly, savoring the smell. Then I followed her, watching her ponderous nude buttocks shake like mountains of jelly as she walked in front of me. She was like some obscene female version of a sumo wrestler. It was disgusting but I was aroused all over again. Nervous. Anticipating. Fantasizing.

She turned around for a moment to see if I was following her, said, "Come on, goddammit! We don't have all fucking night."

I hurried up, holding her discarded clothing tightly, feeling the rough fabric on my fingertips, against my cheek, breathing in the smell of her. I did not care if anyone saw the boner in my pants, I just hoped I would not have any accident that might embarrass me in front of her.

We reached her small closetlike dressing room and she pointed for me to go inside. Then she threw a large tentlike robe over her dripping nakedness and slammed the door behind her.

I took a deep breath.

"Sit down," she said. It wasn't an invitation, it was an order.

"I'll stand," I replied.

"Suit yourself. Tell me, what's your name?" she asked, pulling her clothing out of my hands and throwing them in a corner of the cluttered room, where they landed upon a similar pile of dirty and discarded clothing. The whole place stank of rancid sweat.

"Arthur Berger," I said finally.

She shook her head. "That just won't do. Your new name from now on is . . . let me see . . . your new name now is Service. Do you understand?"

I didn't understand but I wanted to play along. "Arthur Service?" I asked.

'No dammit. Just *Service!*' she barked, watching me closely. Her cold, dark, beady eyes darted to my crotch and she grinned wickedly, licking her lips, rubbing her own crotch for one brief but intoxicating moment in front of me while I watched her. The way she did it, it was the most incredible thing I had ever seen in my life. She was so obscene, so animal sexual, I almost fainted.

When I smelled her juices, I became hard again.

She said, "Very good, Service."

I was hot, feverish. I said, "I don't understand."

She said, 'Yes you do. Come here. Closer.' She disrobed. 'I want to show you something, Service.'

At first it was embarrassing, eventually it grew disgusting. I hated her. Just as much as I loved her. Even today, so many years later, when I fully realize all she did to me, how she manipulated me, hurt me, and used me, I still love her. Even after all the terrible things she made me do and the terrible things I finally had to do to stop her—I still love her.

"Service! Come here, we're going out,' Clarise told me one day. This was weeks later. Now I was living at her apartment up the boulevard from the club where she worked. She had a lot of male callers. It was amazing. I tried to put them off, let them know they weren't wanted anymore because I was Clarise's *new* man, but they all just laughed.

"You're just the latest, young fella," an older man said to me one evening when he came by and asked to see Clarise. I'd seen him on TV, he was some kind of soap opera star.

'You be the new babe in the damn woods here, boy,' a tall black man named Bert said, laughing in my face. He left an envelope for Clarise that was stuffed with cash.

I went into the bedroom where Clarise was lying naked upon her big round bed. She'd just come out of the shower—she almost never took showers. Or baths. That had been hard for me to deal with at first, but after a while I didn't mind. In fact, I grew to like it. Clarise told me that I would. I guess she knew me better than I knew myself. I never realized at the time that that would be my undoing.

I realized later that her men never minded either. No matter what she did, I was just another of her admirers, the latest in a long line and probably the stupidest of the lot. That was when we had our first and last fight.

"What the fuck do you expect me to do, Service!" she'd screamed at me from the bed. "Men give me presents. If you were a real man, you'd give me presents, too!"

"Clarise, I love you."

She just looked away angry.

Then I got angry, too, feeling that tightness around the top of my head. Jealousy, confusion . . .

"I want us to have a good normal relationship," I said.

She just laughed, bitter and cruel. "I don't do *normal*, Service. Neither do you. You think you're here because you *want* to be here. But you're really here because *I* want you to be here. And don't *ever* forget it! You get it now? If you won't do what I want you to do, Service, you can just pack up and get the hell out!"

I was crushed, defeated. Just the thought of being without Clarise set my mind in a panic and dread I had never felt before. My eyes just stared at her. I didn't know what to think, say, or do. I felt tears run down my cheeks. Clarise—

She looked at me and laughed in my face. Loud, callous, taunting me. "You are so damn weak! You worm! You little piece of crap! You dirty turd! You lying bastard. You said you'd do any-

thing for me! *Anything*. Now you're going back on your word! And to think, I used to love you."

Her use of the word "love" for the first time to me shook me more than I realized. It was like a slap in the face, but it was also a thin strand of hope, a lifeline, and I lunged at it with all the desperation I felt.

"I meant what I said, Clarise," trying to hold back my tears now. "I really did!"

She looked at me boldly and shouted, "You said you would do anything for me, Service. Anything I ask. Will you lie, cheat, steal for me?"

I was quiet for a moment, knowing what I should not say, but knowing what I had to say.

"Yes," I said, defeated, trying to wipe away my tears.

"You mean it, Service?"

"Yes."

Clarise smiled now, patting the big bed. "Come here, Service, sit next to me. I want to show you something nice."

That was the first time we really talked. I told her how good I was with numbers, and Clarise was very interested, asking me pointed questions on accounting, taxes, and money laundering. My answers made Clarise happy. She said, "Service, I've never let one of my special admirers into my business before, but I need a good accountant, money manager, cash flow expert. Do you think you are up to the task?"

I jumped at the suggestion. "Yes!"

"Will you do exactly what I tell you to do?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Anything? No questions asked?"

"Yes, anything... to be with you... to be of service to you."

Clarise smiled.

I found out Clarise had a mansion high up in the hills. It was a secluded estate with trusted servants and everything a rich person could want. She used the apartment in town and her club on the boulevard to recruit young men. A certain type of young men. Like me.

My life of crime began a few days later. It started with me going out on my own on jobs. Clarise would tell me what to do, and I would do it. It was as simple as that. Thefts mostly, at first. It began with petty shoplifting, and then purse snatchings, escalated to B&E, armed robbery, and finally kidnapping for ransom. I did it all. Under her orders. Anything she told me to do. When she told me to kill a man I'd met months ago at her city apartment, the soap opera star, I did that too. She gave me a gun and an address. That's all I needed.

Clarise said he had made her mad, that he'd been slacking off in his admiration.

I knew what that meant. He wasn't keeping up his gifts, booty, bribes, payoffs, goodies to Clarise.

Clarise said, "Don't slack off on me, Service."

Never, Clarise, I said, and meant it.

It went on like that for months. I was Service now. Arthur was dead. I lived in Clarise's big house. I wasn't the only one there, though. The big black guy, Bert—who'd made fun of me so long ago, who'd dropped off that envelope full of cash for Clarise—lived there, too. There were half a dozen others. Sometimes Clarise had us work together as a crew on scams or jobs, but mostly we worked on our own, each one of us doing whatever we could do to lavish cash or jewelry at the large feet of our obese goddess. Each jealous and paranoid that the other would gain more favor in Clarise's eyes or some kind of one-upmanship. It was sick and twisted, but none of us cared, least

of all Clarise who owned us all and used us any way she pleased.

I never questioned how this woman could have such power over myself, or so many other men. I was just a small satellite revolving around her largeness—one of many small moons caught in the power of her planetary orbit. Her heavy gravity threatened to crush me at any moment, along with all these others. And like all these others, I could not bear to live without her.

I discovered that Clarise's criminal empire—and that's in fact what it was—stretched far and wide and ran deep. She had extensive interests. Businesses where she was a silent partner, modeling agencies, gaming houses, the garment district, Wall Street, legal and illegal drugs. She had a chain of brothels that poured cash into her coffers. Bert ran them for her. He brought Clarise a fat envelope stuffed with hundred dollar bills every day, gifts from the women that worked for her. It seemed Clarise also had female "admirers" she put to work in her brothels. They, too, it seemed, would do anything for love. Love of Clarise. It was like some kind of twisted cult, and I was in the thick of it, in a privileged position. I was happy. And that's all that mattered to me at the time. I lived in the big house with Clarise. I saw her almost every day. It was only when the time between visits to Clarise began to grow longer that I began to feel edgy. Jealous, paranoid, finally even angry. But I didn't want to express that anger or jealousy, or even ask questions. You *never* questioned Clarise. I didn't want to ruin the good thing I had or get her mad at me. So I shut up. But things were beginning to worry me.

When Clarise called me into her suite of private upstairs rooms a few days later, I was surprised but delighted. She had an un-

usually pungent odor that morning, body odor mixed with the sickness of sex. Then I noticed the man in her room seated on the sofa across from her. I knew him as Riordan, a homicide cop and another 'admirer.' I'd seen him around at the house, like a lot of the others. He sat quiet and calm, eagle-eyed, watching me jealously, openly salivating over Clarise. I hated him. Clarise got up and stood before us, rubbing her hands across her lush obeseness with a lust and venom that made me sweat. I wanted to reach out for her and devour her sex right then and there.

'Easy now, Service,' she laughed, noting my mood, mocking me the way she always did. She looked over at the cop. 'You know Riordan?"

I nodded.

'You two are going to do a special job for me.'

I waited. Riordan didn't say a word either.

Whatever Clarise wanted done, we were ready to do.

Clarise said, 'Bert has been making plans with my little Black Lolita.' The word 'plans' was a bad word in Clarise's book. Only Clarise made plans.

Bert was the large black fellow who ran Clarise's brothels. Lolita was her most prized girl, young, sexy, beautiful, ebony black. It was rumored she was Bert's own daughter from before he had taken up with Clarise. I should have known something was up when Bert moved out of the big house the week before. Now he stayed in the house with Lolita. That looked like Bert was into doing his own kin, but before my thoughts went too far down that road, Clarise cut them off by saying, 'It's not what you think. Bert's trying to take my darling Black Lolita away from me. Out of my service. He's not going to get away with that. I don't know or care what his reason is. He's not going to get away with doing that. Now this is what you two are going to do for me."

I swallowed hard, looked at Riordan. He smiled evilly. Waiting.

It was simple really. Bert was now living at the brothel on West 20th Street, a brownstone in the center of Midtown. The girl known as Black Lolita had a room upstairs and did her business there for Clarise. Sometimes *with* Clarise. Riordan was to get me in with his badge. A bogus bust or shakedown. We'd go upstairs. Then I was to put a bullet or three in Bert's head. Quick and easy. Riordan would take the gun and dump it. I'd go out the back way and head back to the big house to report to Clarise how Bert had died. She always liked to hear the details. Riordan would bring Black Lolita to the big house later to see Clarise. To make amends. She said I could watch if I liked. I didn't think so.

Problem was, I liked Bert. He always treated me good, even if he made fun of me that first time we met. He'd just been telling it true. Anyway, what I knew was that he had some kind of thing for Black Lolita, but I knew she was *not* his kin. Not exactly. She was his stepdaughter. She'd got herself involved with Clarise the same time as Bert. Similar situations but for different reasons. Clarise was powerful, she could bend will, manipulate minds, get anything she wanted. And she wanted it all. She had all of me and now she was going to have me murder Bert. Such was my mission for Clarise. A mission I could not deny. And I knew that Riordan was her latest man toy and that once I killed Bert he'd draw his gun and kill me. And all the loose ends would be nicely tied up. I'd been noticing that Clarise had been getting a little tired of me lately. She got like that sometimes.

When Riordan gave me the gun, I just gave it back to him, determined I would not kill Bert and that I'd have it out with Clarise once I got back to the big house. That was my thought,

and my big mistake. Riordan just sneered at me with his big cop face and pulled out another gun.

"Big Mama told me you might be trouble, and to be ready, Service."

"Clarise? Clarise!" I cried.

"She's been watching you lately. She knows the signs, how her admirers are consumed with love and lust for her big juicy body, obsessed with the nearness of her large gross flesh, desiring to feast upon that flesh in an orgy of wet . . ."

Riordan stopped his fantasizing, smiled, licked his dry lips. His face was flushed, puffy, strange. He pointed the gun at me, said, "Good-bye, Service."

Riordan pulled the trigger and I felt bullets tug at my chest. I felt shock and anger and then terrible pain. A warm wetness ran over my body. I saw that it was red and sticky and smelled like copper. I couldn't believe it was ending like this, alone in a back alley behind one of Clarise's brothels.

Moments later I saw Bert come outside and suddenly Riordan took out the gun I was supposed to shoot Bert with—the gun I had foolishly given back to him because I refused to be a part of this murder plan. Riordan got off three quick shots and Bert fell down dead. One slug had entered Bert's head and torn his skull apart.

I screamed and cried, watching with fear and fascination as Riordan placed the gun he had used to shoot me in Bert's hand, melding the man's dead fingers to the gun stock. Next he took the gun he had used to shoot Bert and put it in my hand.

I looked up at Riordan as he was taking off his gloves and he just laughed, the fatty folds of his face bouncing with delight in much the same manner that my beloved Clarise would laugh. That same cold evil laugh of doom.

I tried to lift the handgun, to get off a shot at Riordan, but I was too weak and fading fast. It just made him laugh all the harder.

"Clarise?" I cried, dropping the gun, falling into darkness.

I don't think I was supposed to live. I know that now. At first I thought everything would be okay once Clarise came to see me. I was up for first-degree murder. We were in a death penalty state. My heart leaped with joy when Clarise came to see me that first day. She had a man with her who she said was to be my lawyer. A fellow named Sinclair, another of her admirers.

Clarise carefully placed her large body into a chair across from me and said, "Just play along with what Mr. Sinclair tells you, Service. Everything will work out all right."

"But, Clarise . . ." I stammered, full of tears.

She reached out and touched my arm softly. "Don't worry, Service. It was all a terrible mistake and everything will be arranged."

"But why?" I asked. The D.A. was already putting pressure on me to make a deal and give up Clarise. But I wasn't talking.

Clarise smiled, beady eyes gleaming darkly. "Bert had to be made to pay. It was handled badly."

"But Riordan said . . ."

She withdrew her hand from my arm. "Service, now, don't make me mad. You know you cannot trust what anyone tells you, except me."

"Clarise . . ."

"I want you back with me, Service. Now you do as Mr. Sinclair tells you."

"Clarise . . ."

"Service!" she said sternly, then she took my hand again and, rubbing it, said, "I wouldn't let one of my best boys go down without a fight. Don't you trust me?"

I nodded. I wanted to believe. I still loved her.

The court case was quick and conclusive. Riordan and his partner testified. They lied. I asked Sinclair to put me on the stand.

but he didn't think it would be a good idea. "Do you want to hurt Clarise, Service? If you testify, that will give the prosecutor the opening he needs to ask you all kinds of questions about Clarise and her business activities. You know Clarise doesn't like anyone knowing her business. I know you'd never tell, Service, but these damn prosecutors are all tricky rats. You want to help some damn D.A. looking to make a name for himself off of the love you and Clarise shared?"

"No!" I shouted, but they were already offering me deals to talk.

"Then be quiet and let me handle everything, Service. You'll do a little time, then we'll get you out." He had such a reassuring manner. Sinclair added, "Do it for Clarise. She'd want it that way, Service."

I nodded and I never talked.

Clarise never came to see me again.

I got twenty years to life in prison. I've only done a few months. I may get out someday on parole, or I may not, but there's really nothing to go back to now, anyway.

Clarise won't return my calls, she won't respond to my letters. When I told Sinclair to ask her to come and see me, he said, "Now, Service, you know Clarise can't be seen visiting a convicted, incarcerated murderer. If Clarise, a lady friend of our gubernatorial candidate, were seen coming to visit you, those damn Republicans would have a field day! You know he's leading in the polls? She's supporting Teddy Longerman for governor. Teddy's one of her 'boys' from the early days. Even before you, Service."

I said that I wouldn't want to spoil anything for Clarise. Last week I read in the paper Riordan had been appointed chief of detectives. I heard through the joint grapevine that Black Lolita ran all the brothels now—in a very roundabout way, of course—for

Clarise. Lolita was convinced that I had killed Bert. I never let on different.

Now I sit here alone. Waiting. They say I'll get out in twenty years. Maybe. But I know that Clarise doesn't like loose ends. I'm a loose end that needs to be looked after. A problem that needs to be solved. Permanently.

"How does it feel, Arthur? To know it'll be decades before you're a free man," the guard said to me. He stood by the bars outside my cell. "That's a long time."

I hardly remembered the name Arthur now. I *had* been Arthur once. Now I was just Service.

"My name is Service," I said simply.

"Sure. Sure, Service." He continued smiling at me.

"Someday I'll get out," I said. Some hope in my voice. "If I could just talk to Clarise . . ."

The guard shook his head.

Then I saw the glint of the slim blade he pulled out from his uniform pocket. He threw it to me through the bars, where it landed on the mattress in front of me.

"She wants it done before breakfast, Service. She told me to tell you to do this one last thing to prove to her that you love her." Then the guard walked away.

It was lockdown time. Lights out. The noise in prison never stopped but I didn't hear any of it now. It was all quiet for me.

It wouldn't be morning for eight hours yet.

I looked at the blade—your generic prison shiv, handmade, untraceable. I picked it up. The cutting edge was jagged but sharp. It would do.

I thought about Clarise.

I lifted the blade to my throat.

Then I lowered my hand.

What had she ever done for me that I should do this deed for her? Nothing! Nothing at all. All she ever did was ruin my life and fill me up with a lot of empty promises. Promises about "us." Not one promise ever came true.

Now I'm locked away in here and she is out there. Away from me. I know she is with other men. Other women, too, probably. Riordan! And she does not come to see me. Never a message or a good word. Now *this*! She wants me to commit suicide for her. After all I've done for her?

I was thinking about spilling my guts on Clarise when I heard a noise down the hall.

It was the guard coming back. This time he had two other guards with him.

I grew alert, nervous.

He was carrying an electric cord. He let me see it as he approached the bars of my cell. It swayed back and forth in his hand, like a noose. The image was not lost on me. He smiled evilly, like Riordan.

I looked at the shiv and said, "I can't do it."

He said, "Here, try this." He threw me the electric cord.

I ignored it, shook my head. "I'm through with that, with all of it. I'm not going to cut my throat. I'm not going to hang myself either."

The guard shook his head. "Oh, yes you are, Service—whether *you* do it or not."

They came closer, opening my cell door. They caught me and placed the electric cord around my neck.

Tight.

Tighter.

The first guard's lips touched my ears as he pulled the cord ever tighter. I couldn't breathe!

The other guards held me fast. I couldn't move.

The first guard whispered to me. "By the way, Service, Clarise told me to tell you good bye. *Sucker.*"

The guards laughed loudly. Taunting me in death.

They laughed so loud I woke up.

I froze, horrified.

Then I was shaking with sweat, chills, my teeth were chattering cold. I found myself mercifully alone.

I let out a peep of laughter like some madman, or some madman suddenly become sane.

I kicked the shiv under my bed.

"The hell with you, Clarise!"

I tried to relax, savoring thoughts of how I was going to get back at her.

Then I heard footsteps approaching my cell. Two pairs of feet entered my field of vision. I looked up at the prison guards who were smiling strangely. One carried something horrifyingly familiar.

THE LAST REEL

Gary R. Bush

Ned, you know part of the story, but not all of it.

Twenty years ago I was eighteen and working in a video store near the air base in Minot, North Dakota. I knocked up a fourteen year old named Terri Young. No abortion for her and I didn't want to be a daddy. Her old man was a master sergeant on the base and I knew he'd come gunning. I took the next bus for L.A.

I hit Hollywood with five hundred bucks in my pocket. Most of it I got out of the till of the video store, the rest off an older woman who got on the bus in Cheyenne. I say older—she was about thirty and leaving her old man. I screwed her in the backseat of the bus someplace between Salt Lake and Vegas and managed to "screw" her again when I lost her in the L.A. bus station.

I was determined to get into movies. I thought I knew a lot about them. I had been watching them since I was a kid. Hell, I'd skip school in the afternoon, do a couple of doobies, and watch the matinee movie on television. And I worked in a video store.

The first thing I had to do was dump my name. Would you believe I was christened Axel Hermann, Jr.? Fuck my old man, like I wanted to be named after that drunk.

My favorite movies of all time were both film noir. *Out of the Past* directed by Jacques Tourneur, and *Double Indemnity* directed by Billy Wilder. I was going to take the name Billy Tourneur but I couldn't really pronounce "Tourneur" back then, not the French way, so I took the name Jacques Wilder. I was ready to be a director.

But Hollywood wasn't Minot and a kid with only a high school education didn't stand a chance against the new crop of directors like Spielberg, Coppola, or Kasdan. Oh, I managed to work as a gofer on a couple of films, but nobody today would remember them.

I had to eat, and hustling my ass to the pervs on Hollywood Boulevard was not my idea of making a living. I saw an ad in one of the tabloids for actors in 'adult films' and went in for the interview. I was tall, good-looking, and could keep it up a long time. Jacques Wilder turned out to be a pretty good name for the porn industry. Getting paid to get laid was great fun, but I wanted more.

I began to write plots for the suck and fuck trade. They were simple stories of horny women and pool boys or horny teachers and their students. The porn community bought my stuff because I could write a good story and not let the plot get in the way of the action. A couple of producers let me direct as well as act and write, and I was on my way.

That's when you and I met, remember, Ned? You were the controller for Slippery Dick Productions and I was directing my first movie for them, *The Bus Ride*. Hey — you write what you know. Then the bottom dropped out of the porn industry.

The coming trend was amateur video. So you and I got together and started Wilder Productions. I raised enough capital seducing and fleecing women to finance a system where amateurs sent us videos, which I edited and distributed. We made a pretty good living, but suddenly we had a chance to get really rich. We discovered the Internet.

It was the opportunity of a lifetime. We got in early and started distributing the amateur stuff, but I could also create my own videos.

I knew what sold and so did you, Ned — teen sex.

It wasn't hard to find teenage girls in L.A. And if they weren't

eighteen, we could provide ID. We turned out quite a catalog—teen was number one, but we had interracial, black, oral, anal, mature, plump, gay, and lesbian. Man, business was good! We had half a dozen sites on the Web, a lot of real time and streaming videos, and we were selling our tapes like crazy. But, Ned, I wasn't happy.

Do you remember about a year and a half ago, you came into my office and I was watching *Double Indemnity*?

"What's this, Jacques?" you asked. "Not *Out of the Past* again?"

"No, it's *Double Indemnity*. Just look at the way the light and shadows enhance the mood."

"You told me that about *Out of the Past*. I've seen both films. They're okay."

"Okay? They are just two of the best films ever made."

"Whatever you say."

"You know I want to do something like this. Or like *Out of the Past*," I told you.

"What, a porn film noir?"

"Not the low-class crap we make now," I answered. "I've got a script ready to go."

"Going to shoot it black and white, dark streets, rain, femme fatale, the whole thing? And you want the Walter Neff role, the character that Fred MacMurray plays, for yourself?" I heard the skepticism in your voice.

"I can act, and I'm not doing Walter Neff."

"Then Mitchum, in the other movie."

"Look, film noir is a great idea."

"Jacques, you're nuts. Who wants to see a film like that? Hell—where would you find an actress like Stanwyck or Jane Greer, or any of those noir women? There isn't a Lizabeth Scott, a Lana Turner, a Mary Astor, in adult films today. You'd never find an actress to carry a movie like that."

"Do you think you're going to get a mainstream actress to play

the part? You thinking Julia Roberts maybe? She gets twenty million a picture. And she doesn't do nude. Listen, Jacques, we're doing fine, we're making millions, forget it. Don't go crazy on me. You make good porn films. You've won the Adult Video Network Award half a dozen times. You are admired by your peers. You make money, you get laid on a regular basis by some damn good-looking babes. But face it — nobody gives a shit if they can act. They have to fuck and give head and take it up the ass sometimes, give the people what they want. Don't go looking to please Gene Shalit."

"Fuck Gene Shalit. I want Roger Ebert, Jack Kroll, Scott at the *New York Times*. I want to make a film better than those golden oldies *Deep Throat*, *Behind the Green Door*, *The Devil in Miss Jones*. They weren't quite mainstream but a lot of people went to see them. Couples."

That was the seventies, times were more open. You aren't going to get couples to go to a movie theater anymore and see porn. Hell, most of the porn houses are shut down. We have the answer right here on the Internet. You know you can make music videos. A lot of adult stars and directors are doing it. That should be mainstream enough for you."

No, no," I said. "You don't understand, I don't want to do a music video. I want to make an art film, a great film noir. But the sex will be real and people will go to see it."

"You want an NC-17 rating?"

"Yes."

"They don't make money."

"This one will."

"You want to be an auteur," you said. "Fuck that. Just be the king of porn. You'll make a hell of a lot more money than some 'artiste.' Besides, you'll never find the right actress."

I began to believe you were right and was resigning myself to the fact that I would never find her. Then last year we were auditioning for our latest suck film, *Cum and Get It*. I was getting

a blow job from this girl from Phoenix, a babe fresh to the business. She finished up and I said, "Okay, honey, leave your résumé with the girl at the desk and we'll get back to you."

"Do you think I stand a chance, Mr. Wilder?" she asked, tucking her tits back in her blouse.

"You got talent, baby. You suck like a Hoover and your tits are real. If you aren't eighteen, we can take care of that."

"Thank you, Mr. Wilder."

"Call me Jacques," I said. She smiled and left, and I was alone.

To be honest, Ned ennui had set in. After nearly twenty years in the business, I was getting tired of it all. What did I have to show for it? No home, no wife, no kids. Well, I did have a kid somewhere, but that didn't count. All I had was money and a reputation for being the king of porn. I wanted more. I wanted to be like the real Wilder. I wanted to be like the real Tourneur. But I was beginning to believe I would never make my film.

I was looking out the office window, watching the sky darken and the rain blow in from the Pacific, getting more depressed. Before I knew it, it was after nine o'clock.

It was still raining when I left the studio in Chatsworth. I got on the 101 with every intention of going home to Los Feliz, but I needed a drink. I thought about going to the Polo Lounge at the Beverly Hills Hotel, but I didn't want to be among those bastards who make up the Hollywood establishment. I had money and I dressed well, but they would never accept me as one of their own.

I got off at Highland, went south to Hollywood Boulevard and pulled up behind the Hollywood Roosevelt. I had the valet park my Jag and I walked through the Spanish Moorish lobby to the Cinegrill.

When I first came out here, I would hang around the lobby. I always felt comfortable, as if I belonged. It was Old Hollywood. The first Academy Awards ceremony was held in the Blossom Ballroom back in 1929.

Christ, Ned, if I had been born forty years earlier I could have made it in the legitimate Hollywood I know that sounds like sour grapes but it is true I have an affinity for that period

The grid was quiet that night It was a rainy Monday and there were only a few people in the place A girl singer was crooning some soft jazz by the piano, which somehow fit my mood.

I sat down at the bar ordered a Maker's Mark, and turned to watch the singer But someone else caught my eye

She was sitting at the other end of the bar, nursing a drink and staring off into space Her clothes were Rodeo Drive or maybe even Paris From where I was sitting I could see she filled out her black cocktail dress where it counts

The face was lovely, straight nose sweet lips I couldn't make out her eyes but I just knew they were nice Her hair was a honey blond, somewhere between Stanwyck's gold and Greer's dark locks

I called the bartender over "What's the lady drinking?"

Macallan twenty five year old It's twenty bucks a shot And she's had three already."

"Make it four," I said laying three tens on the bar.

He pocketed a ten, rang up twenty poured the single malt, and brought it down to her end of the bar "From the gentleman " He motioned with his head.

She looked up, raised the glass smiled, and took a sip. I saw it as an invitation picked up my drink and coat, and moved down next to her.

She stood up In her heels she was nearly as tall as I am I was right about her eyes—they were very nice They were either green or hazel, depending on how the light struck them

"Thank you for the drink, Mr.—"

"Wilder. Jacques Wilder I motioned for her to sit She did and I took the chair next to her.

"Thank you, Mr Wilder" There was a slight accent to her smoky voice but I couldn't place it

"You're welcome, Miss—"

"O'Brian. Conchita O'Brian."

"Conchita O'Brian?"

"Yes." She grinned a beautiful smile. "I am Chilean, many Irish settled there. One of our great leaders was Bernardo O'Higgins. He liberated us from Spain."

"I see. I don't know much about Chile."

"Most Americans don't. What is it you do, Mr. Wilder?"

"Call me Jacques, and I make movies."

"Oh, of course you do. And you want me to star in your next picture." She laughed gently.

"Actually I do make movies, but you wouldn't like the kind of films I make."

"Why, are they pornographic?" She took a sip of her drink.

"We prefer to call them adult films," I answered.

"That is the truth?" She raised an eyebrow.

When I tell women what I do, a lot of them suddenly take interest. Maybe it awakens certain prurient thoughts in them. "Yes, and I'm not ashamed or offended that you would call them porn."

"Strong talk. You like what you do?"

"I do, but someday I hope to make an erotic mainstream movie."

"Really?" she whispered. She leaned into me and I inhaled her perfume.

"Really." I answered, trying to regain my composure. Hell, Ned, how many women have I met, seduced, talked into our kind of movies? Hundreds, and yet the same lines I used on them were more sincere with her than anytime in my life.

"Ever since I came to this town, men have hit on me," she said. "Told me they were looking for their next star. And these were major studio executives. But all they really wanted was to get me into bed."

"I'm no different," I admitted. "You are lovely. You have an aura

about you and I would love to take you to bed. But as for my movie, I think it is a little premature to be talking about casting anyone."

"You are very candid. Now tell me about your film," she whispered.

I took a large swallow of my bourbon to hide the fact I was fascinated by her. "Do you know what film noir is?"

"Of course, a style of filmmaking popular in the 1940s and early '50s. Dark dramas full of intrigue and the double cross. *Gilda, The Maltese Falcon, Double Indemnity*."

"And *Out of the Past*," I added.

"That's right. Robert Mitchum."

"Well, that's the kind of movie I want to make. But the sex will be real and the story powerful."

"I call this film *Last Desire*. It's about a detective who is hired by a beautiful woman to find her missing brother. But she isn't really looking for her brother, rather a man who has a fortune in diamonds. The detective falls for her, finds out the true story, and still helps her in her quest. She double-crosses him and in the end they both die."

"That does sound like a noir story. Have you found your lead actress yet?"

"No, I've never seen anyone who could play the part as I envision it."

"Did you know I acted in films in Chile?" she asked suddenly. "I was also on the stage. As you may know, until recently my country was a military dictatorship, so the kind of film you are talking about would never be allowed. I personally have always been interested in the erotic." She half closed her eyes when she said it. "While we may have lived under an oppressive regime, we Latinos are not without our passions."

"I have a video of one of my films in my suite upstairs. It is in Spanish, but if you would like to see it . . ." She dropped her

thought there, stood up, and started walking away. I grabbed my raincoat and followed her.

At the elevator landing she looked in the mirror and straightened the hem of her dress. I asked, "Do you know that the ghost of Marilyn Monroe is supposed to haunt this mirror, and people have reported seeing her reflection?"

"Well, we all are haunted by ghosts, aren't we, Mr. Wilder?" She pushed the button, we entered the elevator and rode up to the eleventh floor. I followed her down the hall and she opened the door to her suite.

Suites go for big dough at the Roosevelt. Whoever Conchita O'Brian was, she had money. "Make yourself a drink and one for me, please," she said, pointing to the bar. She disappeared into the bedroom. I poured myself a light bourbon and water and a stronger single malt for her.

She reappeared shortly, wearing only a black silk slip and carrying a videocassette. She walked over to the VCR and inserted the tape. "No other Hollywood type was ever interested in seeing this film or even if I could act. All they wanted was sex." She curled up on the couch and patted the seat next to her. I immediately sat down and handed her the Scotch. We clicked glasses and drank.

She was hot, Ned. But something told me not to make my move just yet.

"The film is in Spanish, but I hope you can see that I am a good actress." She started the tape.

The movie was about a woman (Conchita) living on this ranch at the foot of the Andes. She kills her lover and convinces her husband he had tried to rape her. Later her lover's wife, an Indian woman, kills her. The film seemed familiar to me, but I couldn't place it. Then it came to me. It was similar to an old Bette Davis movie called *The Letter*. Some Englishman named Maugham wrote a play both movies were based on.

But the important thing here was that Conchita O'Brian

could really act. Not even understanding the dialogue, I could see I had found my star.

"What did you think, Jacques?"

You were wonderful." I took a deep breath. "I want you to star in my movie."

"So you can take me to bed."

"No, not so I can take you to bed. Because you have the look, the sophistication, I need."

"So you do not want to take me to bed?"

"Dammit, of course I do."

"Then what are you waiting for?" She moved in on me and kissed me hard. I returned her kiss, swept her up into my arms, carried her into the bedroom, and threw her onto the bed.

She reached for my belt buckle. I kicked off my shoes and got out of my clothes as fast as I could. I laid her back and pulled up her slip. She wore no underwear and I entered her quickly. We fucked wildly. She pulled at me and scratched my back while I buried myself in her. She bucked and screamed and it was crazy. We both came fast.

I held her for just a little while before we were both ready to go again. I kissed her breasts and her stomach, then lower. She moaned and pulled me up—we made it again. It was as wild as before, but it wasn't just fucking this time. We made love.

We went on for a long time. It was like I was a kid again. I had no trouble keeping it up. And if it looked like I couldn't, she knew what to do.

Of all the women I have screwed or been blown by, none could compare to Conchita. I was in love for the first time in my life. I forgot every bimbo I had ever seduced. I knew that this woman was for me.

Much later we talked. "Jacques," she said, "never have I had a man such as you."

Then I said it. "I love you, Conchita."

"How can you say you love me? We fucked like animals, we hardly know one another."

"Yes. But in my business I have known a lot of women. Beautiful women, women who knew how to give pleasure, but none like you. I thought I would never meet anyone whom I could love."

"Jacques, I feel something for you, but give it time."

"Of course. I guess you think I'm a jerk."

"No, you are a great man, I think, but let us move a little slower."

I reluctantly agreed and we soon fell asleep, holding each other.

The next morning we made love again, and believe me, the night before was no dream. Later we ordered room service. Then, regretfully, I told her I had to leave.

"Already?" she pouted.

"Yes, I have to get to work, and I want to get going on the film."

"You were serious, then? You really are going to make your film and you want me to star?"

"No one else." I assured her. We kissed good-bye and I went home, showered and changed, and returned to the studio.

"It can't be done, Jacques," you insisted when I told you I had found my star. "Who are you going to get for the male lead? What about supporting players, not to mention a crew? The guys we got working for us couldn't set a noir mood if their lives depended on it. Forget it, Jacques, and let's get back to *Cum and Get It*."

"Yes, it can be done. In the first place, I'm going to be the male lead. Don't look at me like that, I've acted before and I can do it again. As for supporting players, this is Hollywood. There are plenty of actors out there. Good character players who will jump at the chance. I've already talked to Geoffrey Holmes about the role of the heavy. He has a lot of movie and TV credits to his name. As for the mood, I found a fellow who was an assistant to Nick Musuraca on a couple of films."

"Who the hell is Nick Musuraca?" you asked.

"The cinematographer on *Out of the Past*."

"The guy must be eighty years old. Where did you find him, the old folks' home?"

"No, he lives in Brentwood. He's seventy-five and was working in television until last year. I've been in contact with him for years. His former assistant's name is Jimmy Goldstein and he knows his stuff. He's the one who turned me on to Holmes. Ned, this can work."

"How much money?"

"I can bring it in for under four million."

"You're kidding. You can't make a quality film for that kind of money."

"I can. I'm not taking a salary. Goldstein wants a percentage. It can be done."

"And if it goes over budget?"

"Then you can help me raise more, Ned. You're the money man."

"You must have me confused with David Copperfield. What about our other projects?"

"You can oversee them. Once this picture is made, we can both retire."

"You're full of shit, Jacques, but it's your call. I'm only a minority partner in this firm."

The next few weeks were crazy. I lined up a crew, interviewed actors, sought locations. The area up near the Hollywood sign was perfect, even my own house made a good location. Conchita was with me all the time. She knew her movies and had great ideas. We collaborated on script changes.

One night we were in her suite at the Roosevelt when she said to me, "Jacques, *mi amor*, to make this film really work we need better sets, better costumes, we need to find the top people."

"Top people take money. Ned advises against it."

"That's another thing. Ned has to go."

"What do you mean?"

"Ned isn't interested in this project. If you want this film to succeed, he has to be off the set."

"And who is going to raise the money to get the top people? Ned is a money guy, he knows how to keep to a budget."

"He's a miser. I have money. You have invested nearly four million in this property. But I am willing to match it. We can be partners. Fifty-fifty."

"You're serious."

"I am. This film will work. And we will reap the rewards."

"What do I tell Ned? He's my friend."

"Tell him he's out. He just wants to make porn films. He's a junior partner. You *are* Wilder Productions. You don't need him."

"I just can't . . ."

"Do you love me?"

"You know I love you."

"Then Ned is out."

We made love again. I knew I needed her more than I needed you, Ned.

You were pissed when I told you we were going to increase the budget. Then I told you I had a backer.

"Conchita. Where did she get four million bucks?"

"She has it. And she wants you out."

"Out?"

"You can go on running Wilder Productions. I'm bringing this film out under a new company. I'm calling it Andes Films."

"You're fucking crazy. That Chilean bitch has got you by the balls."

I hit you then. I'm sorry now. I hurt you pretty bad. You left and that was the last time we really talked.

Once production started, I didn't have time to worry about you. Jimmy Goldstein knew his stuff. As I watched the rushes every night, I knew we would have a hit.

Conchita was there for me when we weren't making the picture. We were making love. It just got better. And our love scenes on-screen were alive as well—you could tell we weren't faking.

Sometime during our lovemaking I told Conchita my whole story, the porn trade and how much I wanted out. I even told her about Terri Young and my fleeing Minot.

She reacted quietly. "We all have ghosts, don't we, Jacques-"

"Chile?" I asked.

She nodded.

I didn't even know where Chile was until I looked it up. It is this skinny country on the west coast of South America with Andes on one side and the Pacific on the other.

It isn't a poor country like I thought. It has a lot of mineral wealth, like copper. Back in the seventies this guy Allende was elected president, but he was some kind of a Marxist and the economy went to hell. Anyway, Allende was overthrown by this General Pinochet, who set up a right-wing military dictatorship. Until recently, the military ran the country.

Conchita told me she finally had to leave Chile because her family was considered to be closely tied to the socialists and her career in movies was stagnating.

I didn't care if she had been Stalin's daughter. I was in love with her.

We finished the film. Jimmy, Conchita and I did the editing. We knew we had a winner when *Last Desire* was accepted at the Sundance Film Festival.

The night before we were to leave for Park City, Utah, Conchita went home early and I stayed to catch up on some paperwork. My office door opened and I looked up.

He was an elegantly dressed older gentleman. I'd say mid-sixties. Gray hair, tall, with a handsome face and a mustache trimmed thin, old-fashioned.

The younger guy with him was also well dressed, but it couldn't hide the fact that he looked like a pug. He was broad shouldered and muscled. I guessed him to be a little shorter than my six two.

"How did you get in here?" I started to pick up the phone to call security, but the old guy put his hand over mine.

"If you are trying to call your guard, he is indisposed at this time, Mr. Wilder." He had an accent similar to Conchita's.

"What do you want?" I had a .380 in the desk but I kept my hands in sight. The younger one had a bulge under his jacket and I knew it wasn't his wallet.

"To talk for now, Mr. Wilder," the old geezer replied. "I understand you are in a relationship with Conchita O'Brian. It will stop. Also this film of yours, I want the negative and the prints."

"Who the hell are you?"

"Ernesto, show him who we are," he said to the pug.

"*Sí, mi general.*" He moved fast for a big man. He was across the room, then suddenly he was in front of me. He grabbed me and pulled me across the desk. The first punch startled me. The second knocked me back into my chair.

Ernesto turned to his employer, smiling. That's when I pulled my automatic out of the drawer and walked around the desk.

"Step back, you son of a bitch, and put your hands on top of your head. You, too, old man." I took out my handkerchief and wiped the blood off my lip.

The old guy smiled and complied. The pug hesitated and I opened his scalp with my pistol. He collapsed at my feet. I kicked him in the head a couple of times to make sure he was out. I bent down and removed his gun, a nine-millimeter Beretta.

"Who the fuck are you and what do you want?" I turned once again to the old guy, waving my pistol in his face.

The gun didn't seem to faze him as he spread his blue-veined

hands. "Put your hands back on your head," I ordered. Once more he complied, but his smile didn't leave his face.

I spun him around, patted him down, and found his wallet and a Chilean passport.

With his back to me, I scanned his documents. His name was Raul Velasco. According to his passport, he was a general in the Chilean Army.

I checked the papers of the downed pug. He was a sergeant in the same army. Ernesto Pérez.

"Turn around, General," I said, backing up against my desk.

"May I put my hands down?"

"Yeah, but keep your distance or I won't hesitate to kill you."

"As you say. Now can we talk?"

"I don't think so. I plan to call the cops."

"That would be foolish. First, the sergeant and I have diplomatic immunity. Second, it could be very embarrassing for Conchita. Perhaps I should not have approached you as I did. But I ask you to listen to me."

"Talk."

"Conchita has stolen from me. She has taken nearly twenty million dollars and I want it back."

"You're full of shit. She's no thief."

"No, then how did she come up with so much money for your film? How does she live in the style that she does?"

"I never asked. She was an actress in Chile."

"An actress." He laughed. "Do you think an actress in Chile makes the kind of money your screen queens do in America? Conchita got her money from me."

"How?"

"We are husband and wife."

I started laughing. "You're married? What would Conchita want with an old goat like you?"

"I may be old, but is it not obvious? I have position, power and, of course, money."

"Whatever you have, you don't have Conchita."

But I will again. Now, I would like this filthy film you have made."

"You have ten seconds to get out," I said. "And take the gorilla with you." The sergeant was coming around. I kicked him awake.

"You are making a grave error, Mr. Wilder," said the general as he helped his flunky to his feet.

"I've been threatened by bigger men than you." It was true. Irate boyfriends and fathers often came after me. That's why I keep a pistol in my desk. From now on I planned to keep one on my person.

By this time Conchita was living with me, and when I got home, she could see I was shaken.

"*Mi amor*, what is it?"

I told her about the general.

She started sobbing. "Is it true?" I asked.

"It is not what you think."

My blood was up. "Are you married to that old man?" I had her by the shoulders and threw her against the wall. I raised my hand to hit her.

"Jacques, please let me explain." She was begging me.

"Make it good, baby. I don't like being played for a sucker."

"I had to marry him. It goes back twelve years. My family had once been prominent but during the upheavals of the last few decades they fell on hard times. They were accused of being supporters of Allende. Raul was a very powerful man in the junta. He told my parents the price for their freedom was me."

"Twelve years ago? You couldn't have been more than—"

"Thirteen years old," she finished the sentence. "He made me his mistress. Oh, he treated me well enough. He sent me to

school and later let me act. But all the time I hated him. Then his wife died and he forced me to marry him. It wouldn't do for a great general to have a wife who was an actress. So he made me give up my career.

"Jacques. I hate him. One day I found his account books. He had money in a numbered Swiss account. It was easy enough to loot it and come to America."

"This is all true?" I asked.

"I swear," she said through tears.

"And what about your parents?"

"They are both dead, within a year of one another. He has no hold over me." She looked at me with pleading eyes and I took her in my arms.

"We'll forget him. Tomorrow we fly to Salt Lake and then on to Park City. I feel good about our movie."

"It is our movie, isn't it, my love? But we cannot forget about Raul and his hombre Ernesto. They are dangerous men."

"I'm dangerous, too," I said. "We aren't going to let anyone stop us."

"I don't feel safe," she said.

Here. I handed her my .380. "Do you know how to use this?"

"Yes, I do. Raul has huge ranch holdings among his other enterprises. I used to hunt with him. But what about you?"

"I have Ernesto's pistol. And since we are chartering a plane tomorrow, we won't have to worry about airport security."

She put her arms around me and we made love there on the floor of the living room. It was as passionate as the first time.

The next day Jimmy and Geoffrey Holmes met us at the Burbank Airport and we flew to Utah.

We stayed at a resort at Park City. I had rented a chalet for Conchita and myself and rooms for Jimmy and Geoff.

We enjoyed the town and the festival. There were a lot of celebrities and critics in town, and the place was fun. Conchita

and I went skiing. She was marvelous. 'Chile is a country of mountains,' she said after she had beaten me down the slopes.

We made love every night. It was almost like a honeymoon.

And when the awards were given out, it was unbelievable.

We took the grand jury prize for best dramatic film and Jimmy won the cinematography award. I couldn't believe it. I walked off with the Waldo Salt screenwriting award and the directors award. I had played the hard core aspect down enough to inspire 'did they or didn't they' controversy in the media. Perfect!

Conchita was the buzz of the festival. Agents and producers were lining up to see her. We were on top of the world.

We partied until early morning, then caught a shuttle back to our chalet, discussing our next move. I was going to get out of porn. For the first time in my life I had done something I could be proud of. We talked about our next movie, which would have major studio backing.

I unlocked the door and we went in. But we weren't alone.

"Raúl!" Conchita yelled, grabbing my arm.

"Sí, Raul. Ernesto, his gun." The burly sergeant stepped out from behind the door, grabbed me, and took the Beretta.

"You're too late to stop the movie, Velasco," I said.

"Yes, you degenerate. Your film has made quite a splash."

"You call me degenerate? I'm not the one who took a thirteen-year-old girl from her parents who were political enemies and made her his mistress."

"Is that what she told you?" He laughed. "The O'Brian family were not my political enemies. Her father was a drunk, her mother a whore who I had many times. Actually, for a good deal of money, her parents sold her to me."

And that makes you better, because you bought a slave. General, you are still a degenerate."

He didn't answer me but turned to Conchita "Why did you leave me and take my money? I gave you everything."

"Everything! Jacques is right, I was your slave. You made me quit acting when we were married. I couldn't go anywhere or do anything without one of your stooges following me. Believe me it took some doing. But I got away, even if I had to seduce Ernesto to do it."

"That is not true, *mi general*," Pérez said.

"True or not, I want you back, Conchita."

"Back so I can be your trophy? I don't think so. I'm staying in Hollywood. I'm going to be a star. You can go to hell."

"Conchita, listen to me. When I die, you will inherit everything. See," he said, taking a document from his pocket. "This is a copy of my will, the same will that is on file in Santiago with my attorney. It leaves everything to you." He handed it to her.

She read it over and then threw it on the floor. "Yes, in twenty years or more when you die. Don't you understand? I hate you. I won't be with you."

"Conchita, please. Things will be different."

"No, once we get back to Chile I will be your prisoner again."

"I swear by the saints, that will change."

"The saints gave up on you years ago, Raul. You and Pinochet and the rest of your rotten group. You have blood on your hands."

He pulled himself up straight. "I am a patriot." Then to Perez. "Ernesto, pick up the will. We will be taking the señora back with us. A plane awaits in Salt Lake City. We will dispose of Mr. Wilder on the way."

Ernesto bent to pick up the will. That's when Conchita pulled my automatic from her purse and put a round through the top of the sergeant's head.

She swung the gun in Velasco's direction. "Go back to Santiago with you? You have lost your mind! Do you think I would ever

want to crawl in bed with you again? You are disgusting! Your flesh is flabby, your varicose veins make me ill."

"Conchita, I beg of you. I forgive you making the dirty film. Come with me, you will have my fortune when I die."

"You forgive me? Well, Raúl, *mi general*, I will never forgive you. As to your fortune . . ." That's when she pumped three bullets into him.

"Conchita, for God's sake!" I went to the general, but he was dead.

Conchita picked up the Beretta. I looked at her and said, "We had better call the police."

"No, we cannot do that. Do you think I can inherit Raúl's estate if they believe I killed him?"

"We'll claim self-defense. He came here to kill us. After all, the Beretta belongs to Pérez."

"I cannot be involved. I must leave."

"Leave? What about us, our film, our life? You are free of the degenerate."

"He isn't the only degenerate. Do you think you are much different?"

"What are you saying?"

"You, who seduced a girl barely older than I. You, who make films with underage girls and boys. Do you not see that you are also warped?"

"That's all behind me now. I'm legitimate."

"Too late, Jacques. Oh, I wanted this movie as much as you did, and I could have loved you. But when you told me about your past, that girl in Minot . . ."

"But you stayed with me," I said.

"Because I was trapped. Just as Raúl had trapped me, so did you. The movie had to be finished, and I wanted my investment back. Well, I don't need it now. I will have Raúl's holdings, and believe me, they are vast."

"But we made love!"

"You know I'm a good actress."

"And what about Raúl and Ernesto? How will you explain them?"

"I won't have to because I will be gone. But the police will see that you shot it out with them. This gun"—she gestured with my .380—"it is yours. It killed Ernesto and Raúl. This pistol"—she held up the Beretta—"killed you."

"Me?"

"Sorry, Jacques. I really did love you, but I could not be with a man who destroys young girls."

Then she shot me, Ned.

Maybe fifteen or twenty minutes had gone by when I came around, the .380 in my hand. The bullet from the Beretta had struck my shoulder and I knew the bone was broken. My ski jacket had absorbed a lot of blood and I was getting weak.

Conchita was gone. I took out my recorder and, like Walter Neff, I made this tape. I am going to try and drop it in the mailbox at the main lodge.

Ned, if you get this, here's what I want you to do. *Last Desire* is going to make a lot of money. When they discover me dead, the scandal alone will raise the box office receipts. I told you I have a kid somewhere, or at least I think I do. Give my share of the box office to Terri Young. Any good private investigator can find her. The studio and both production companies I leave to you.

As for Conchita, do what you think is best. If it were me, I would let her go. She was right about me. I'm no better than General Raúl Velasco. Let her have her life. And the truth is, I'd never make a movie as good as *Last Desire* again.

Well, I've reached the mailbox, Ned, and I'm getting really cold. Just like Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity*, I'm bleeding out. But Edward G. Robinson isn't going to call an ambulance and save me for the death penalty. I wanted to make a film noir. I guess this is the last reel.

A DELICATE MISSION

Michael Collins and Gayle Lynds

Under the bed, Lisa held her breath. She heard Matt and the woman laughing as they came into the apartment. She glanced at her watch. Damn. She'd been fifteen minutes late leaving, and Matt and the woman were fifteen minutes early. The plan was for a half-hour safety cushion, and in the Company you followed the plan to the letter. When you didn't, people died. Thank God the signal to tell him she had *not* found the diary was fail-safe—no signal at all.

She'd been careless. When she couldn't find the woman's diary, she'd stayed too long. But what had happened to Matt? It wasn't like him to lose control of a female asset. What had made him let the woman bring him home to her apartment early? If he hadn't spoken in the hall, if she hadn't recognized his voice instantly, she would've been discovered, and the whole mission blown. As it was, except for the one closet, which was too risky, under the bed was the only hiding place in the studio apartment. And a single glance under it would reveal her.

She listened to them taking off their coats, the creak of the closet door, the rattle of coat hangers, and then silence. While she congratulated herself for realizing the risk of the closet, she strained to hear what was happening, but neither spoke. The silence seemed endless. Was Matt in trouble? Visions of the woman holding a gun on him, her hand on the trigger, a small, cold smile on her face, flashed through Lisa's mind. She tensed.

Then she heard a soft gasp. A female gasp. And not a gasp of

fear or pain. A soft gasp followed by a sigh and a low male voice whispering gently, and all at once she saw them. There they were, reflected in the long horizontal mirror above the woman's art deco vanity. Matt was holding the woman tight to him, her face tilted up from her five foot six to his six foot three, his lips tight to hers, and yet soft. Lisa knew, his right hand out of sight under her lifted skirt. His hand moving. Moving, she knew, oh so gently, gently.

Another breath-catching gasp.

Lisa put her hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh, remembering their first date, and her own gasp as his fingers moved, stroked oh so gently under her skirt.

Matthew Van Antwerpen had been with the Central Intelligence Agency fifteen years when Lisa Baxter joined the Company after Cambridge and three years with the LAPD antiterrorist task force. A confirmed bachelor and a legend at Langley for the uncanny understanding of women that had made him a top recruiter and handler of female assets and double agents. Matt noticed Lisa at once, but he was in the field so much he had little chance to do anything about her. That had gone on for two years. He had no particular need for a permanent woman—his work in the field took care of that nicely—but every time he saw Lisa he went home alone unable to get her out of his mind.

It wasn't that she was stunningly beautiful. She wasn't big, she wasn't lush, and her body didn't turn every head in the room, male or female. But she had something Matt could not get out of his mind.

The daughter of a Scotland Yard CID superintendent and an American actress who worked in both London and Hollywood, Lisa was tall and slim without being too thin. She was about five foot ten, 130 pounds, her short chestnut-brown hair seemed to

shine with an inner illumination, her legs were long and she strode out almost like a man even in high heels. She dressed in clothes that outlined her shape, and returned a steady, confident, but not arrogant gaze. But none of that explained what Matt couldn't ignore or forget.

Perhaps it was simply what some psychologists call *presence*. Perhaps that came from her sense of dual nationality. She had lived in London with her father until he died in the line of duty when she was fifteen. Her mother resettled them permanently in L.A. This seemed to have given her a certain confidence of manner and carriage. A boldness that had brought her into the CIA and made her, the first time they were assigned to the same job, walk straight up to Matt and say, 'You're Van Antwerpen. I've heard about you. I'm Lisa Baxter. We're going to work together.'

They went out for coffee. To get to know each other. He made no move—that would have to wait until their assignment was completed. They didn't actually see much of each other in the field, worked different ends of the job, but when it was over, Matt decided it was time. He didn't rush, he knew about those things. They were, after all, colleagues, and the chemistry couldn't be changed too abruptly. There is a great deal of difference between colleagues and lovers. More coffee, theater tickets for some months in the future, lunch, drinks after work, and the big leap a week before the theater date, dinner. Eye contact. Talking about each other. Then the night of the theater, a late drink, and home afterward—her place or his, it made no difference, depended entirely on the woman and how the evening had gone.

In Lisa's case, the evening went well. It had been her place, and she had known exactly what would come next. Inside the door, she turned, waiting, and Matt had not hesitated. He had too much experience on the job for that. Then there were her small gasps, growing more heated, and the bedroom

From beneath the bed, Lisa watched Matt and the English woman cross from the door of the woman's studio apartment to where a little sitting area had been created in the cramped space. A tiny round table covered with a cheerful yellow and blue tablecloth from the sunnier climate of the Mediterranean. Two small wicker straight chairs with seat covers that complemented the tablecloth. A tiny vase of fresh yellow daffodils and lavender crocuses in the center.

Lisa felt she was seeing a scene from some commedia dell'arte performance as the pantomime played out in the long mirror above the vanity. The small Englishwoman, wearing her best spring dress with its flowing skirt that did not suit her short height or her narrow figure, clung to his arm, holding him close, looking up into his face with that faint aura of desperation Lisa had seen in the eyes of so many assets. It was a double desperation. Was what the asset was doing the right thing and worth the risk? And was the handler, who'd coerced him or her into betraying whatever trust it was, really in love?

They were so needy, all of them, and knew, deep down where it could not be spoken or even thought, that they *were* needy and that they were also betraying themselves. How, then, could they trust anything they wanted to believe? At the same time, they made themselves believe this was what they truly wanted to do, that they were acting on their beliefs and principles, that they did love their handler, and so believed he or she loved them.

The woman finally released her grip on Matt's arm and sat him at the tiny table, saying brightly, "You just sit like a good boy and behave yourself while I make the tea."

Watching them in the mirror, Lisa couldn't help thinking that tea had not been on her mind, or Matt's, on that first date, and they hadn't sat anywhere. She'd half pulled, and he'd half carried her, straight to the bedroom. This woman preferred to postpone,

pretend, build romance To Lisa, knowing what Matt was doing it was almost tragic.

The woman carried a tray from wherever her kitchen was, and placed it on the table where it took up so much room they had to use it as the tabletop The pot was under a colorful cozy, and the woman added the milk to the cup before pouring the steaming black tea They sat smiling at each other, until Matt finished his tea in two long gulps and stood up Lisa could almost hear the woman hold her breath.

Matt reached down and pulled her roughly to her feet spilling her tea all across the tray Damn, don't play with me any longer, sweetheart Get the damn diary so that's behind us or I'll fucking rape you right here."

The woman seemed to swallow hard her gaze riveted to his face She reached down to where her handbag stood beside her chair Without another word she opened the bag, took out the diary Lisa had spent two hours searching for, and handed it to Matt He shoved it into his suit jacket pocket, tore off the jacket, and picked her up to carry her to the bed

Lisa nodded to herself He was good at the job Perfect timing Soft and gentle in the beginning then eager to get to what he desperately wanted, eager to think of nothing but this woman Wanting nothing to distract them from each other She found herself feeling warm inside in admiration of his tradecraft skills Or was that what she was really feeling, what was making her feel so warm?

They moved in together after a month. By then Matt knew he wanted that and he was fairly certain Lisa wouldn't say no Not entirely certain, Lisa was unlike most women he'd known For one thing, she was totally open and direct about everything, including sex There had been an asset he was romancing in

Nicaragua years ago a fiery Sandinista he had to use to get close to a high party member to set him up for an assassination. She had been almost as bold and outspoken, and he'd had to get out of Managua and the country fast after the assassination before she realized he had been CIA all along and she'd been used.

But that woman hadn't been as blunt as Lisa, especially not about sex. He and Lisa had been sleeping together regularly for only two weeks when, one night as they lay exhausted in bed, she asked, "You're a Romeo agent, aren't you? You have to do it on assignments, when you're working a woman asset or foreign agent. Take her to bed to show her you love her, are serious. Do the whole thing."

No one had ever asked that question, male or female. It was part of the job sometimes, for both men and women. Everyone tacitly understood that, but no one talked about it.

"Oh, I know you have to sometimes," she said. "I'll probably have to sooner or later. The bosses sort of pussyfoot around that, but it's only logical, and I can fake it pretty good. But how does a man fake it?"

"Just the way a woman does. Fake moans, fake emotion, fake intensity, fake orgasm."

"How can a man pretend an orgasm? A woman can feel it inside. She'd be all wet even down her leg."

"Not when you use a condom."

"You can see what's in a condom."

"I'm fast into the john, and most women don't look. I distract them, cry wolf if I have to. You know, 'What's that?' I heard someone coming. Any trick. Anyway, I never had a woman actually check the condom. Don't forget, I'm not emotionally involved, so I go down fast, and then the condom's hanging so loose and wrinkled it'd be hard to tell."

Lisa had shaken her head. "There are other things, other signs, I'd know."

He'd laughed then. Well, none of them ever have. Or I'd probably be dead."

She could be unnerving sometimes with her directness, her sharp eye for details. Still, he knew he wanted them to live together. He'd never lived with a woman, except, of course, his mother and two sisters, but they didn't count. He'd never thought of them as women. Not women as he'd come to know them both on and off the job. He was nervous about taking the step, wary of the potential complications he'd heard other men talk about, especially with his career choice and hers, but in the end he knew it was what he wanted.

She asked, 'Our work won't be a problem? Being away from each other so much? In danger a lot of the time? Never sure exactly where the other is?"

He pulled her to him, smiled into her green-flecked eyes which, when she wore heels, were almost on a level with his own. 'So you won't be there waiting for me all the time, and I won't always be home by six o'clock.'

Lisa laughed, kissed him, and said yes.

That night was the first time he'd abandoned himself totally with her, tasted every part of her, let her do anything she wanted with him, and let himself have his full, uncontrolled orgasm with the gasped endearments that burst from him. 'Oh Jesus, baby, oh damn, gorgeous girl. God, that was perfect, sweetheart, perfect, perfect . . .' his eyes closed and still feeling ecstatic pain go on and on and on . . .

Their legs appeared directly in front of Lisa's eyes as they stood at the edge of the bed between Lisa and the mirror. The Englishwoman's legs were better than Lisa had thought from seeing them reflected at a distance. The frilly spring dress dropped about her ankles, her red silk and black lace bikini panties followed to the floor.

and a red brassiere Then her legs disappeared as Matt moved to his right Her weight fell onto the bed above Lisas head, and Matts legs appeared to Lisas left and in the mirror at the same time

His real legs and now she could see the woman naked on the bed in the mirror waiting Matt slowly unbuckled his belt, stepped out of his trousers in front of Lisas eyes and in the mirror Taking off his shirt and briefs the woman's eyes staring up into his face Matt lifting and spreading the womans legs and then dropping to his knees with his face buried in the dark wedge of hair The hard roundness of his ass in the mirror the hard throb of his erection in front of Lisas face

Under the bed, Lisa reminded herself of that first time in her apartment remembered how different it had been than this charade how much more intense frantic, tearing at each others clothes Here Matt was detached, clinical

The field job was a big one The DCI herself called them all in Five operatives Lisa and three others from the British desk, and Matt

It s a delicate mission the DCI told them "We need extreme discretion and caution."

Any operation against our dearest allies is delicate isn t it?' This was George, the oldest body on the British desk and close to retirement

The DCI, who had formerly been a renowned federal prosecutor in San Francisco, did not take a possible rebuke from those beneath her well I m glad you remember, George I'd begun to wonder She glared at them all, for another second But to return to the point You recall the scare we had a year ago over the concept of a united Europe?"

She waited for them to dutifully nod Well, we ve had a hint no, call it a whisper that the notion is surfacing again over there The tip is vague and questionable, but as you

can imagine the president is extremely sensitive to the smallest hint after last year. He wants it tracked down quickly and quietly."

Why us? Lisa wondered, and then her voice took on an edge of alarm. "You're not saying . . ."

The DCI nodded. "Yes, the whisper we have is that a top assistant to the British defense minister, Jasper Tudor, has had a series of secret meetings with a German general who's a known advocate of European military self reliance and possibly of a truly united Europe. The meetings, the information has it, took place in Denmark. While we tend to support a limited military self reliance, we don't favor the concept of Europe as another single force in the world with us and China."

George, the older agent near retirement, said, "We want them to help us out with small wars, but depend on us for command and logistics. That keeps them sort of like mercenaries."

The DCI stared at him. "Thank you for the clarification, George. Now, the way I want this handled is Mack and Samuel work on General Ballack's end, looking for any connection between him and Tudor this last year. See where he's been, what he's been up to, and what exactly he's been working on officially or unofficially. George will remain here working on any electronic trail and coordinating the team." She glanced at George. "Wouldn't want to lose George now, would we?"

The laughter was a bit strained, but jovial enough. The DCI turned to Lisa. "Jasper Tudor has a young military officer on his staff who does little but provide a personal link between Tudor and the active military when he needs it, but he travels with Tudor everywhere. He's bored, itching for a more exciting assignment, and more time to do what young officers do. We think he's vulnerable to a woman and probably loose tongued. He's your target, Lisa. Handle him any way you think is likely to get us what we want to know about his boss."

Finally, she faced Matt. "But we think our best chance is a file clerk in Tudor's office who works directly under his private secretary. She was divorced three years ago and has recently begun frequenting singles bars, pubs, and clubs in London. She's known to keep a detailed diary. She's yours, Matt."

In the long mirror, Matt's dark hair moved between the woman's legs, and under the bed Lisa could feel what he was doing with his tongue, his lips, his teeth. Lightly moving the tongue, the lips compressing as the woman pulsated and writhed with pleasure, the teeth biting, nibbling . . . nibbling . . .

Lisa took deep, slow breaths. Watching and seeing the difference, the slow, measured moving of his head, his hands merely holding the woman's legs apart, not gripping her flesh, kneading her flesh, his face buried against her. Doing everything, but without the passion.

The woman on the bed thrashing, crying out as she climaxed again and again beneath his tongue and teeth, but Matt not thrashing. Holding to her and watching the contortions and smiles of her face, how she bit her lips as she came again and again.

The lieutenant's name was Lambert ffolkes. "We've spelled it that way in the family since the tenth century back in Normandy. Don't ask me why. I think it's damned silly and pretentious."

Lisa met him at a party carefully arranged by the Company and had liked him at once. He was young, eager, open, and honest. A fact, when she reported it, that pleased their immediate boss at Langley, and the DCI very much.

"That kind is always the easiest to fool, even turn," Matt had explained.

More important, Lambert ffolkes was obviously attracted to her,

and the attraction had grown rapidly over the first month as she saw him almost every day and subtly tried to learn everywhere he and Jasper Tudor had been over the year. She managed to slip her love of Denmark into nearly every conversation, and how much she wanted to return to Copenhagen, see all the islands and rural areas she had never had time to visit. Explaining that her mother was Danish, and had talked so much about its castles and islands and windswept peninsulas jutting into the Baltic and North Seas.

"Have you ever been, Lambert?"

"Oh, yes. On holidays, you know. It's really not all that much, eh? I mean, the islands are lovely, and the castles, but I actually prefer Scotland. More rugged, I suppose. Or the ancestral lands in Normandy. Probably have a few ancestors came from Denmark, too, though."

Another time, as he was clearly falling in love with her, he told her, "I'd much rather take you to the Mediterranean. Majorca, Ibiza. Sun and sand and wonderful food." He hesitated. "Would you come, Lisa? With me. You know I'm in love with you."

"Don't say that unless you really mean it," she said.

"I do mean it. I won't be old Tudor's errand boy forever. Perhaps I could get a posting to America eventually. Of course, I intend to remain in the service, make a career. We Hollkes have for generations, you know. I do have the connections. But that—that might not suit you." He gave a small, nervous laugh. "I might not suit you."

"Let's find out," she said, and took him up to her apartment.

In the flat Langley had bought for her, he was reluctant at first. He wanted everything to be right. He didn't want to take advantage of her. He didn't want her to think she had to—you know . . . do it just to please him.

"Come here, you idiot."

She had taken him to bed, and she had performed well. He was awkward, a long way from Matt, and he was, after all, not

Matt But she played her role pretending multiple orgasms, bringing him to a fine climax, letting him talk afterward, listening guiding his talk But lying in his arms, she felt oddly warm and yet discontented a discontent he might have felt and not understood, puzzled about.

After lying there in silence for a time, he blurted out, 'Oh if you want to go to Denmark I'll take you along next time Old Jasper can't object to my bringing my fiancee It's not that I do anything over there I just stand around with a stupid grin while he chatters on in his boring meetings

It was more than she had hoped to get and she couldn't push it any further or even Lambert could have become suspicious Jasper Tudor had been making repeated trips to Denmark She would find out for certain whom he talked to, and what they talked about, the next time.

In the mirror the woman suddenly turned on the bed and pulled Matt to her She grabbed his erection, stroked it, played with it licked it lightly, and then took it into her mouth Lisa couldn't see his face in the mirror, but she knew he had his eyes closed and she could see his muscular buttocks tighten like a vise Until he grunted, breathed hard through his clenched teeth, and suddenly pushed the woman away, rolled her over raised her legs and bent them back over her head, climbed onto the bed and plunged his erection into her as she gave a loud cry

Lambert did not hesitate the next time Lisa brought him to her Company-arranged flat They had been to the theater and dinner and when she suggested drinks at a club he said why not her place· Once in the flat, she had not had to take the lead He wasn't rough, he didn't hurry, but he didn't hold back either and

when he climaxed, she suddenly knew she was not going to have to fake it this time. Her orgasm was big, spreading through her groin like fire. Surprised, even bewildered, she pushed the unwanted reaction of her body to the back of her mind as she lay in his arms and thought about how she could best bring up the subject of Jasper Tudor's meetings in Denmark, and who else had been there at the meetings.

Then he said, 'I know I love you, Lisa, but do you love me? At all, I mean?"

She came alert, but kept a grip on herself. 'What made you think about that so suddenly? I never said I was *in* love with you, Lambert. But I enjoy you a lot.'

"I know," he said, an almost sad tone in his voice.

Lisa felt a chill. 'Lambert . . ," she began.

He held up his hand. "No, let me talk." He was silent another moment and then said, 'Some people came to see me yesterday. They told me a story. About you. They said you were an American CIA agent whose only interest in me was to get information, and had you been asking questions, hinting at anything, suggesting things?"

Her heart was icy. "Lambert . .

"I didn't tell them about Denmark or anything else. I told them they were wrong. We hadn't been doing anything but enjoying ourselves, and what we were doing was none of their damned business."

"Lambert, I swear . . "

"I don't care what you are or why you wanted to be with me. I've fallen in love with you. I want to marry you. That won't change. But I have to know how you feel. I have to know if this is all a game, a job for you, or if you do love me even a little."

She felt herself relax. 'Lambert, I do . . "

"No. Don't tell me now. I don't believe this is just a job or a game for you. Not after tonight." He gave a small smile. "I'm not

quite as naive as I may seem. Tonight was different, and I want you to think about it. For a few days.

He got out of her bed, dressed, kissed her, and left.

Alone, she breathed a long sigh of relief. She was safe, at least for a few days. Lambert would not tell MI5—it had to have been them, or perhaps MI6. Not until she was out of the country. But she could not continue with Lambert. They would have to find another way. Matt and his file clerk and her diary. She would help him with that now.

She rolled over to reach for the phone, and for an instant the memory of her sudden, unexpected orgasm came back. Her hand hesitated above the receiver.

Then she took a deep breath and picked up the phone.

Under the bed, Lisa watched in the mirror and wondered how long Matt would or could keep it up. In more than one meaning. She watched as he pumped into her, changing positions, raising her in his hands as she shuddered and moaned and clung to him as if she would never release him or let him out of her.

And then Matt let out a great cry, his body shook all over as Lisa stared at the scene in the long mirror, and his ecstatic voice burst out as he gasped and panted. "Oh Jesus, baby, oh damn, gorgeous girl, God that was perfect, sweetheart, perfect. . . per fect . . . yes . . . yes . . . oh yes . . ."

Matt returned stateside the day after getting the diary, turned it over to the chief of the British section to pass on to the DCI to do with what she would, and then waited for Lisa. Three days later she was still not back, and he stormed into the DCI's office.

"Why isn't she home? I got the diary, what more proof do you want?"

"None, really," the DCI said, and motioned to the chair facing her desk. "Sit down."

He fell into the chair and leaned forward. "You don't have her still working on that Lieutenant ph-ph-ffolkes, do you?"

"No, we don't."

"Then where the hell is she? Is she safe?" He was suddenly alarmed, had stood up again. "Has something happened to her? What is it?"

"I wouldn't worry about it, Matt."

Now he was back on his feet. "She's three days late, and I'm not supposed to worry?"

The DCI said, "Sit *down*, Matt."

She waited until he was in the chair again. Then she glanced out her window at the Virginia sun. "You don't fake it, do you, Matt? That's why you've always been so successful with women, assets. You don't pretend about the sex. You really want them, the women. Enjoy the sex with all of them. You enjoy every second. The woman doesn't matter, any woman is the same in bed. It's you who counts."

"What the hell does that matter? I get the job done, don't I? What do you or the Company care how I do it?"

"We don't," the DCI said dryly. "But tell me, Matt, the day you got the diary, did you have sex with the woman?"

"Of course. How else was I going to get the diary and not have her blow the whistle? She was in love with me by then. If I'd tried to just walk out and—"

The DCI interrupted. "You and Lisa left a half hour gap between her leaving the woman's apartment and your arrival that night, right?"

"Naturally. You always need to leave a margin for error, just in case."

"Were you by any chance early?"

Matt scowled. "Fifteen minutes. The woman was so damned eager I couldn't stall her any longer. Why?"

The DCI sighed, and not happily. Yes, that would explain it. She opened a drawer in her desk, took out an envelope that had been opened, and handed it to Matt. He saw that it was addressed to him at Langley with a postmark from some town in France he'd never heard of. He looked at the DCI.

She shrugged. 'When mail comes here for an agent from another agent who is late returning from a mission, we open it.'

Matt pulled out the single sheet of paper. There were three words on it in Lisa's handwriting. *I could tell.*

The DCI said, "I'm afraid Lisa's gone over to the Brits. I expect she spent the last two days telling MI6 everything we wanted to know about Jasper Tudor and the European military. She put three years in on the British desk here, so she's got a great deal to tell them about all our operations against them, who our assets over there are, the works. They must be ecstatic. She's a gold mine. Of course we'll never know for sure, and we'll never ask. We're allies, after all."

Matt stared. 'Gone over? Impossible! She'd never ...' Then he had a sinking feeling. *I could tell.*

The DCI tented her hands, rested her chin on them. "I expect Lisa was late that night, too. Late leaving the apartment. The woman's flat was a studio. Where was there to hide with some degree of safety except under the bed? Yes, I expect she was under there from the moment you came in, until you and the woman fell asleep and she could sneak out."

Matt stared down at the sheet of paper, the three words, and the envelope with the postmark. He looked up. 'France?'

'On her honeymoon, I'd say. When we read the letter, we checked up, and one of our other assets over there informed us that Lisa and Lieutenant Hoffkes were seen together and with two MI6 agents entering their building.'

"Honeymoon?" The sinking feeling had climbed higher on Matt's body now.

The DCI nodded and glanced out her window at Virginia again. 'But don't feel too bad, you got the job done. There's always the chance we were had from the start. With her dual loyalties, she could have been MI6 all along, and your sexual proclivities in the service of your country might have had nothing to do with what happened.' Then she looked back at Matt and smiled. 'Of course, there's also the possibility that Lieutenant Ffolkes was an MI6 agent who did a better job.'

PERFECTION

Jeff Gelb

Alex Barry's attention was riveted by the sight of the beautiful woman, not five feet from him, as she moved slowly up and down—up and down; her sleek body glistening with sweat, her bare legs opening and closing, the muscles of her inner thighs twitching with the effort. The view was—exhilarating, to say the least. Barry adjusted the bulge in his shorts, not really caring if anyone else saw him do so, while he continued to focus his gaze on the woman, who was now wiping sweat off her ample breasts—which were barely contained by the moist sports bra. There was no doubt about it—the All-Pro Sports health club was the hottest place in town to find the perfect woman. And as Barry continued to watch the woman go through her paces at one machine and then the next, each device honing a different set of muscles, he chuckled at his good fortune at finding this ultimate meat market.

In the past, he'd gone to strip clubs to meet beautiful women who liked casual sex. But he'd quickly found that the strippers were all pros. They might sleep with him—but never for free. And Alex Barry had never paid for sex.

When he'd turned forty last fall, his doctor had told him during his annual physical that his cholesterol was through the roof, and he'd have to start exercising or he'd more than likely drop dead of a heart attack within a few years, as his father had a decade ago.

Reluctantly Barry had started searching for a health club that

he could tolerate. That was no real effort in a city the size of Los Angeles, where everyone was consumed with his or her body and health clubs were as numerous as gourmet coffeehouses. To date he'd joined three clubs, scanned them for women, made his moves, and then moved on. And now it was time to do so again.

He cleared his parched throat, hopped off the machine he'd chosen for a better view of the busty Latina woman—but then weren't all Latina women busty?—and took a sip of water from his sports bottle. He approached the woman, and as she looked up at him, Barry could feel her gaze as she took stock of his body, which was far from perfect. But at least he wasn't overweight, and if he sucked in his stomach, he even looked somewhat buff. Or so he'd been told by the other women he'd scored with from the other clubs.

"You almost done?" he asked her, appreciating the woman's wide hips and dark eyes. He could get lost in those eyes . . . at least for a night.

"I just have one more set to do," she purred.

He noted a hint of an accent. It was sexy to him. But then, everything he could see of this woman was damn sexy to him, from the mole on her right inner thigh to the gumdrop nipples that were sticking proudly through her bra. Perfection was everything to Alex Barry, and this woman appeared to be perfect. He felt his erection rising again and hoped she would notice.

"Great—then maybe I can buy you something cold to drink?"

She returned his smile. "I thought you wanted to work out?"

"Oh, I want to work out, believe me."

She laughed and sat back down at the machine. As she grabbed at the pulleys, her biceps expanded and her breasts squeezed together, then relaxed, then squeezed again. "What's your name?" she breathed as she exerted her muscles to their utmost.

Barry watched as sweat ran down her neck into the deep

crevice of her breasts. *Nice. Very nice.* "Barry. Barry Allan," he lied effortlessly. The less she knew about him, the better. Just in case things didn't work out. He extended a hand.

She regarded it for a moment, then let the weights drop back to their former position and grasped his hand. "Marcela," she said. Her handshake was strong, but he wasn't surprised. She looked like she worked out daily, which was just what he wanted in a new sex partner. He figured all of L.A.'s women were fair game to him. Why not go for the best? The ones with perfect bodies. The minds didn't matter—he wasn't interested in their brains. But their bodies—he would kill for a perfect body. He chuckled at the thought.

"What's so funny?" She cocked a generous eyebrow at him.

He realized he'd laughed aloud. "Just admiring your strength. I'd hate for you to grab the wrong thing with that much strength."

She regarded him with what appeared to be bemusement. He figured she wasn't used to guys coming on to her that openly. But what the hell—he'd figured the odds a long time ago. Ask enough women to fuck, and sooner or later, one would appreciate the straightforward approach. And since he only asked perfect women to have sex with him, when one finally caved, he knew he was gonna have a great time. Which he did, each and every time. The truth was, he'd discovered that these health club chicks loved to show off their perfect bodies—they were all exhibitionists at heart. That's why he figured they worked out in such revealing outfits in the first place.

"You wanna test that theory?" she asked, and gave his private equipment a quick squeeze. He gasped, and she winked. Even for an L.A. woman, she was shockingly forward. Had he finally met his match? He hoped so.

Their attention was diverted momentarily by one of the many TVs hanging from the ceiling of the large room. A newscaster was describing the sordid details of the latest victim of the latest L.A.

serial killer " three beautiful young women throughout Los Angeles have been victims of brutal stabbings

Oh Lord,' Marcela fretted ' That's terrible Those poor women . . "

Barry quickly spoke up, hopefully drowning out the reporter He couldn't afford to break the mood right now especially for that story. "You were saying?"

She stood up and he had the chance to admire her body all over again. Strong calves and an amazing ass that looked well, it looked just as perfect as the rest of her

"You want to get that drink or you just wanna drool? she asked as she laughed, shook her head, and started to walk ahead of him, drying off her sweat with a small towel. Outside the women's locker room, she put a hand on his chest and he could feel her heat through her palm He'd never had a Latina before, but the word 'hot blooded ran through his mind as she said, 'Keep it in your pants while I change I won't be a minute

He whistled as she left the busy room of people grunting through their workouts He couldn't believe his luck—Marcela was the most forward woman he'd ever met. He had no doubt she'd be fucking him by the end of the night.

Good to her word, she returned in a flash and they headed outside, where the orange sun was setting over the Manhattan Beach ocean, which was visible from the parking lot.

"Warm night," she said as she took his arm 'Where are we going to spend it?"

He shrugged, genuinely admiring her no-bullshit approach "How about your place?'

She frowned and leaned into him, her pillowy bosom pushing against his shoulder It was a heavenly feeling "I have a nasty roommate Doesn't like men ' She winked How about your place?"

He hesitated In all of his conquests, he'd never brought a

woman to his apartment. He liked the anonymity of their not knowing where he lived. "Well . . ."

Her eyes narrowed. "Oh—I get it. You're married." She let go of his arm. "Well, it would've been nice."

"No, no! That's not it at all. It's just that . . . well, I wasn't expecting company tonight. The place is a mess."

She took his hand back and smiled.

No doubt about it, he thought as he looked into Marcela's coal-black eyes. She was the most perfect one yet. "You're on," he said.

"Walk me to my car," she requested. "And I'll follow you."

They traversed the length of the parking lot, past an endless display of BMWs and Benzes. It looked like a Beverly Hills used-car lot. He wondered what sort of car she had. "What about that cold drink?" he asked.

"What—there's no beer in your fridge?"

He chuckled. He'd never met anyone like her before—so self-assured.

She stopped at a massive black SUV. He nodded. "Should've known."

"Meaning?"

"Well, you don't take shit from anyone elsewhere, do you? So why take it on the road?"

"You really understand me, don't you?" She leaned into him and kissed him full on the lips, and her tongue slid in. He almost leaned away from her aggressiveness, but then decided to even the odds by biting her—not hard, but hard enough that she couldn't recapture her tongue. Her eyes opened in surprise and he winked mischievously, then let go. She laughed and opened her car door. "You'd better be all you're advertising, buster," she laughed as she climbed into the vehicle.

"You'll be surprised," he promised.

Barry's apartment was one block up from the beach. It was too expensive for a computer programmer's salary, but he was only renting it for the summer when he could watch the maximum number of beautiful, nearly naked beach bunnies as they walked by his building to the water. She followed him up one flight of stairs and he unlocked the door. 'Nice view,' she offered as she looked beyond his living room window to the ocean.

"I'll say," he agreed as he walked up behind her and planted his hands on her ass. She wriggled against them and then casually strolled around the small apartment.

'I thought you said it was messy,' she said as she entered the near spotless kitchen. 'Not even dishes in the sink.' She opened up the refrigerator and grabbed two beer bottles, tossing one behind her. Barry ran to grab it before it broke on his carpet. She turned around, laughter in her eyes. 'I thought you were right behind me.'

'I will be,' he said as he unscrewed the bottle cap and downed some of the brew. She did the same, catching his eyes as she licked the lip of the bottle slowly.

'Ummm,' she commented as she reentered the living room which was sparsely decorated: a couch, an armchair, two lamps, a large screen TV, one bookshelf. She glanced at the book titles and frowned. 'All books about serial killers?' She turned to him. "You're not some kind of a freak, are you? I mean . . .'

He looked down at the day's newspaper on the armchair. The front page headline screamed, 'Serial Killer Strikes Again! Third Victim in Three Weeks!"

He grabbed the newspaper and folded the front page, but she caught the headline. 'Maybe this wasn't such a good idea,' she said as she backed toward the door.

He held his hands up in the classic 'I surrender' pose. 'Whoa, slow down. You're not thinking that I could be the sicko who's been sicing up those cute chicks- I mean, what are the odds?" He laughed.

Marcela had one hand on the doorknob but she didn't move. Well, a girl can't afford to take any chances, and what with all these weird books and everything . . .

"Hey, that's just what I like to read. Doesn't make me a maniac! Didn't you ever go to a slasher movie?" He took a single step toward her. He didn't want to blow it now. She didn't open the door. That was a good sign.

She sighed. "I want to trust you." She dropped her hand from the door and he took it, gently squeezed it.

"C'mon, Marcela, let me show you how much you can trust me." He ran his other hand softly down her cheek and felt her stiffen. "Really, do I look like a sex maniac to you?"

She glanced below his waist and laughed. "Yes, actually, you do." She gave him another squeeze and Barry groaned.

"Don't stop," he pleaded. She slid his shorts off and he bounced to attention as she knelt down to focus on his engorged manhood. He sighed as she took him in her mouth and let her tongue slip around him as he pushed in and out. Finally he pushed her to the thick carpet, where he grabbed at her T-shirt, raising her arms so he could lift it over her head.

She was braless, and her breasts were even better than he could have hoped: huge brown areolas and large nipples that were erect and moist from her body sweat—glistening Hershey's Kisses. He knelt down and licked them, enjoying their salty goodness.

She grabbed him closer to her, and he was momentarily surprised by the strength of her upper arms. He kissed her passionately, and this time their tongues were both exploring each other's mouth. Finally they came up for air, both half naked and panting.

"Well, we're a pair," she laughed. "You with no pants and me with no shirt."

They finished disrobing and clenched each other again. He began exploring her with his fingers, lightly brushing them against her engorged clit, she bucked and groaned. She grabbed

at his penis and began to stroke it faster and faster, matching her breathing.

'Slow down,' he objected, but without much force, as she took his penis into her. They both moaned with ecstasy as they coupled.

'See, I'm no serial killer,' he whispered in her ear.

'Yes, but you are a sex maniac,' she purred as she bit his ear, drawing blood.

"Hey! I'm not into that."

'Oh, where's the big tough man now?" she teased. 'I thought you'd be tougher than the others."

He stopped moving inside her. 'The others?"

She kept moving beneath him, then rolled over so she was on top. She straddled him, riding him as she spoke. 'I've been looking for the perfect sex partner. Couldn't find one in Mexico, so I thought I'd try the States. But I couldn't find perfection here either."

He was aroused as hell by what she was doing, but the story was confusing and distracting him. "Can we maybe have this discussion . . . you know . . . after?"

But she continued to grind at him while her mind was focused elsewhere. "I tried so many, but none of them were what I was looking for. When you came along, I figured it was fate. You know, time to try my luck with a guy."

He was on the verge of coming, but he'd caught her words. "You were fucking . . . girls?"

'Women,' she said as she bucked harder and faster against him. 'Three in LA, so far, and none of them were perfect, so I had to—well, I had to move on."

"Three of them?" His heart was racing, and it wasn't just because he was about to explode.

She continued. 'And when we met, I thought, Here's some-

one who can keep up with me. But now I see you're just like the others. Imperfect."

She was shaking her head as she reached behind her for something in her purse.

He came, and as he did, he saw the knife in her hand and watched as she cut him, finally sinking it into his chest. He had to admit, even as he gurgled his last breaths, that she was right. He was a wimp, he wasn't at all what he tried to be with the many women he'd dated and lost, as well as the few he'd actually gotten to fuck along the way.

But this final orgasm, pain and all, had been the best of his life. In some ways, he thought as he faded out forever, he'd finally found . . . perfection.

WALKING TO PARIS

Rex Miller

Okay, here's one, and you can believe it or chalk it up to my propensity to bullshit after too many Tom Collinses. This is about that Britney Cooper you heard me mention—and she was Britney way before little Spears was shaking her ass for fun and profit.

What did she look like?

Well, just look at Meg Ryan and add a few years. If Meg was brunet instead of blond, you'd have that same look that Britney had—same sparkling eyes and sexy mouth. In her time, she was the hottest piece of tail that flew for TWA, and knew it, and if you asked her what she did for a living, she would tell you she walked to Paris.

There was as much truth as poetry in that. If you didn't believe her, she'd invite you to follow her around in the miles of aisles of one of those big jumbo jets on which she plied her trade—serving food, dispensing beverages, bestowing blankets and the countless other things that flight attendants do. And in those days of coffee, tea or me, when the stewardess was second only to the cheerleader as a source of infantile male fantasy, she also granted more men than could be counted a flirtatious tone and promising moments of eye contact, which occasionally paid off for both Britney and the now-and-then-lucky guy.

Finally her wheels fell off—which in stewspeak meant that her naturally flat feet got flatter—this for a gal who was anything but flat—as well as bunions and everything else that can go wrong

with your dogs. No one could deny this doll had sexy legs—nor could she deny she had lousy feet.

The same year that her wheels went, so did her husband. It started with him fooling around on her. Now, she had done the same to him many times, but always one-night (or -afternoon or -evening) stands—strictly entertainment between planes. She had imagined Alexander might have done the same, and while she didn't exactly like the idea, they were being true to each other, in their way.

Whole different deal when she discovered that Alexander, her hunky sales manager hubby, was in a long-term affair. And to add insult to injury, the mistress (that term was still a bit more common then) was a younger version of Britney—right down to the stew's uniform!

Payback became Britney's preoccupation. She wanted to get even with her husband in the worst way, and of course had no idea that she was really as mad at herself—for getting older—as she was at her cheating hubby. Anyway, she went about it methodically—a good stewardess has to be able to organize, right? And Britney arranged the drink cart of her quest for revenge in just such a fashion.

The fact that she needed a transfer, due to her aching feet, was helpful in her effort. With her tenure and charm, making that happen was no biggie; she landed a receptionist gig with the airline's Chicago office. Leaving L.A. actually appealed to her—too many young beauties out there. Time for a new start . . . minus a cheating man, and with a nice nest egg . . .

And it wouldn't take much effort—just bending down to pluck a little rectangular box from under the kitchen sink.

One of the things that really pissed her off about Alexander was that he still liked to fuck her—really had a good time doing it, too! It was obvious—and yet he was still catting around with this year's model of Britney. On the other hand, this was actually helpful in her effort.

Britney called Alexander, breathing into the phone with her sexiest voice — which was pretty damn sexy.

She purred, "Let's get together Friday."

"Isn't that your last day?"

She hadn't mentioned to Alexander that she was transferring to Chicago. "It's my last day of walking to Paris, all right," she said, "and I want to celebrate. Meet me in the VIP lounge. I've got free miles to use up, and you have all those vacation weeks you have to burn, or you'll lose 'em, right?"

"Right."

"I'll take your sexy ass to Paris and you can learn what the Left Bank is really like."

She and Alexander had been to Paris several times, although never for longer than a day or two, and they'd always had a wonderful time — sight-seeing, sex, great food, sex.

So he took the bait.

And when Friday rolled around, Britney made sure that the little rectangular box from under her kitchen sink was tucked away in her purse. She arrived early so she could sit in a quiet corner and discreetly stir something special into his Bloody Mary.

It was a fairly quiet time when Alexander joined her, and she gave him his drink, and they toasted to their trip and their marriage.

He gulped at the drink, made a face, and promptly started coughing. "What the hell! Did you put something in my damn drink?"

"That's right."

"What?"

"What else would you put in a rat bastard's drink? Rat poison."

He clutched his throat, his face was gray.

Calmly she pulled a little slip of paper from her purse with a typed telephone number on it. "This is the emergency number –

sort of the poison hot line You can call to get an ambulance and they can pump your stomach out. It's not much fun, but it will save your miserable life You want me to make the call?'

"Wh-why?"

'Because you're fucking that little stew Why do you think? Shall I call?"

He nodded glumly and she made the call She even waited around to make sure that Alexander had help coming. As soon as the emergency team showed up, she left on a plane to Chicago

Two weeks passed She got a phone call from her husband, who had acquired her new number from work

'I want out, Alexander said He sounded frightened

'So do I And I will be—only next time I won't give you the emergency number."

"You're threatening me?"

'No But you do know what I'm capable of now, don't you?"

Brit, this has got to stop If you cut me loose with no strings attached, I'll give you everything Our entire joint account Our stock portfolio You can even have the van'

'Oh, but I would lose such an adoring husband "

"Please, Brit."

'Sounds like a winner Done deal"

A week later she was nine grand richer that was how much they had in their joint savings account. And then she received $28,500, the cash out value of their stock portfolio.

So she had $37 500 a two year-old van, and she'd disposed of a cheating husband, without really having to dispose of him

And she figured she would ride a desk on her sweet fanny—no more walking anywhere—until her retirement or maybe till some nice older man who liked her smile flew her to a nicer life altogether.

Which is exactly what happened Some richer than sin stock-

broker, older fella, married her about three years later. Funny thing—he died about two years after that, and Brit is one rich ex-stewardess now.

No, no—I don't think she killed him or anything. Just a coincidence . . unless maybe the old boy was cheating on her.

True? Of course it's true. Another drink? I recommend the Bloody Marys.

Dedicated to Beautiful Brandy and Delicious Dawn

FEEL THE PAIN

Michael Bracken

I screwed the barrel of my .38 into the spot behind Jeremy Wilson's left ear where his jaw attached to his skull.

"Go ahead," I said. "Give me a reason to pull the trigger."

Jeremy slowly raised his arms. Blood dripped from his knuckles and down the backs of his hands.

"Get your clothes, Cassie," I said to the plump brunet with the pulped face.

She stared at me through eyelids nearly swollen shut.

"Now!"

Cassie Wilson pushed herself away from the wall and scooped her clothes off the bed, holding them against her naked chest as she hurried across the room.

As soon as Cassie stepped through the open door, I drove my knee into Jeremy's groin. When he doubled over, I introduced my knee to his face and smashed the butt of my revolver against the back of his head. He folded like a bad poker hand and I left him facedown on the worn carpet.

Outside the motel room, I holstered my revolver, then steered Cassie toward my car, opened the passenger door, and pushed her inside. I walked to the other side and climbed in beside her. Then I keyed the ignition, dropped the Chevy into gear, and pointed it toward the highway. As the front tires bucked up onto the two-lane asphalt road from the gravel parking lot, I glanced at my passenger. She hadn't spoken and she still held her clothes against her chest.

"Your father hired me," I explained. "He wants you home."

She didn't respond.

Half an hour later I stopped at a clean and well-lit convenience store service station. I pulled the car around back, next to the rest rooms. When Cassie made no effort to leave the car, I went into the men's room, wet a handful of paper towels, and returned.

I dabbed them against Cassie's face and she winced with pain. After wiping away most of the blood, I saw the damage her husband had done. I walked around the building and inside, returning a few minutes later with antiseptic and bandages. I did my best to patch up Cassie's face, wondering how much her father would ultimately spend on reconstructive surgery.

I finally convinced Cassie to release her death grip on the wad of clothes in her arms and I slipped her blouse onto her. I didn't bother with her bra. I'd never been good getting one off a cooperative woman and doubted my ability to slip one onto an uncooperative woman—and I didn't bother with her skirt. When I finished buttoning her blouse, I slipped one of my business cards into her pocket.

Then I drove through the night, only the occasional pair of oncoming headlights and the two cars that raced past us reminding me we weren't alone on the nearly deserted two-lane highway. Two hours into the trip, Cassie asked, "Why's he want me home?"

I glanced at her in the darkness of the car. Cassie hadn't moved since I'd dressed her.

"He didn't say."

She didn't speak again.

Dawn arrived in Waco only minutes ahead of us. I exited the interstate at Valley Mills and a few minutes later found my client's

home on Austin Avenue. I pulled into the circular drive and stopped before the wide brick steps. Before I could climb out of the car, the front door opened and Richard Masterson greeted me. He wore blue silk pajamas under his blue silk robe. Behind him stood Carvel Casey, a thick-chested bruiser in skintight jeans and a loose gray sweatshirt.

By the time the two men had descended the steps, I'd slid out of the Chevy. As they approached, I jerked my thumb over my shoulder. "She's inside."

Masterson and Carvel helped Cassie from the car, up the steps, and into the house. I followed, stopping in the foyer while they assisted Cassie up the sweeping curve of the staircase to the second floor. From behind and below, I saw the holster at the small of Carvel's back, the one usually hidden by his sweatshirt.

I paced until Masterson returned.

He pulled twelve C-notes from a gold money clip, counted the bills twice before placing them in the palm of my hand, then said, "Send me a bill for your expenses."

I didn't count the money, didn't even look down as I closed my hand around the crisp green bills and stuffed them into my pants pocket. I said, "Soon as I get to the office."

Elroy Johnson sat at my desk, awaiting my arrival. When I opened my office door and stepped inside, he asked, "Where you been all night?"

"With a client."

"Fat little brunette?" he asked. "Face like a pomegranate?"

"Why?"

"Got somebody says they saw you walking out of a motel in Texarkana about six hours ago. Drove off with a brunette. Motel clerk says two people checked in. You wasn't one of them. The brunette was." He paused, pulled an unfiltered Camel from the

pack in his shirt pocket, and lit it with a silver Zippo. "So was the dead guy y'all left behind."

I'd hit Jeremy Wilson hard enough to knock him stone cold but I hadn't killed him. I didn't react to Elroy's narrative.

"Single bullet, back of the head," Elroy continued after a long drag from his cigarette. "Somebody messed him up good, first."

"The police?"

"My guy won't remember you by the time they find him." Elroy took another long drag from his cigarette, then tapped the ash off into a paper coffee cup from which he'd been drinking prior to my arrival. "The girl?"

"She's home."

"She say anything?"

I shook my head. "Nothing important."

"That's good," Elroy said. He took one last drag from the cigarette, then dropped it into his cup. The cherry died with a quiet hiss when it hit the coffee dregs.

Elroy stood, walked around my desk, and dropped the cup into the waste can next to the door. He gave me a two-finger salute, then stepped into the hall, closing the door behind him.

Texas is a big state made smaller by men like Elroy Johnson. With loose connections to families in Kansas City, St. Louis, and New Orleans, they laundered money, brokered deals with the Mexican Mafia, and shared news of important events across the state. I'd known Elroy since childhood when I'd played high school football with his nephew, and our paths crossed more often than I ever cared to admit.

I replaced Elroy in the chair behind my desk, feeling the still-warm leather against my backside. I booted up my Macintosh, prepared an expense report for Masterson, then prepared a deposit slip for most of the money he'd given me earlier that morning.

With nothing scheduled for the rest of the day, I thumbed through a couple of science fiction magazines my kid had left be-

hind the last time my ex had let him visit then filed all the paperwork associated with a workmen's comp fraud case I'd closed the previous week.

By the time Millard Wayne Trout 'Millie' because his family still called his grandfather Millard stuck his head into my office and asked about lunch, I'd been dozing facedown on my desk for nearly an hour.

'Not today' I told him 'I have errands'

Millie nodded his shaved and tattooed head 'Suit yourself, Moe Ron. We're getting wings."

He returned to his shop in the front of the building and I slapped myself awake Then I grabbed the deposit and Masterson's expense report and stepped out of my office. Only two other businesses remained in the building An empty suite across from mine had once been occupied by a finance company too legitimate for the neighborhood and I walked down the hall between Millie's Tattoos and Piercings and Big Mac's Bail Bonds into the blinding midday sun.

The rest of the week passed into history without another job landing on my desk I felt every second tick away my bank balance, and I briefly considered looking for some kid's missing poodle in hopes of earning the fifty dollar reward

The following Monday, Cassie Wilson stepped into my office Even though the swelling had subsided and carefully applied makeup covered most of the bruising, she couldn't hide the bandage across her flattened and reconstructed nose

I stood.

'This you?' She handed me my card Neatly thermographed on the front were my name Morris Ronald Boyette and my contact information

"Yeah."

'Father says you brought me home

'Regular chauffeur service.' I directed her into one of the two guest chairs, then settled into my seat

I don't remember much about that night.'

"Wouldn't expect you to."

"You shoot Jeremy?" she asked.

"It matter much one way or the other?"

She thought about her answer for a long time. Then she shook her head

"Then why'd you come?"

She pulled an envelope thick with cash from her purse and dropped it on my desk. 'Your expenses."

I let the envelope lie where she'd dropped it. "Your father could have mailed a check."

I wanted to thank you,' she said. "For ... for whatever you did that night."

I stood

She stood

I walked her from my office and down the hall to the street. A silver Mercedes idled at the curb. Carvel behind the wheel. He watched our reflections in the rearview mirror as I opened the rear passenger door and helped settle Cassie inside.

'I ever need anything ...?" She let the question hang.

"Just call," I said.

I closed the car door and Carvel dropped the Mercedes into gear.

Millie stepped outside and stood on the sidewalk next to me as the Mercedes pulled away. 'Nice piece of work, that one.'

"Too rich for my blood."

"What's with the nose?"

"She had some work done," I said.

"Just the face?"

"Far as I know."

Millie scratched the top of his head. He wore a wife-beater, exposing the tattoos covering his arms, hands, and fingers. "Up for lunch?"

I thought about the envelope of money still lying on my desk. "It's on me."

When I returned with burgers, fries, and sodas for both of us, Millie said, "Elroy's in your office."

"How long?"

"Ten minutes, tops."

I grabbed a fistful of fries and walked down the hall. I pushed my office door open and found Elroy sitting in my chair reading one of my kid's science fiction magazines.

"Get this," he said without looking up. "The Hansel and Gretel witch? A time traveler. Where do these guys come up with this stuff?"

I ate my fries and waited.

Elroy closed the magazine. "Got a problem in Texarkana," he said. "Good news, my guy, bottle of Thunderbird and he forgets his mother's name. Bad news, he's not the only one saw you there."

"Who else?"

"Doctor. He's at the motel boffing one of his nurses. He's married, she's married, still he does the Good Samaritan thing and steps forward."

"Identifies me how?"

"Make, model, and color of car. Partial plate." Elroy said, "Won't be long before you're questioned."

I knew the drill. Even though Elroy wasn't my client this time, I'd worked for him many times before—even taking a bullet meant for his nephew. By collecting Cassie Wilson from Texarkana, I had stepped into Elroy's shit and he wanted to en-

sure that I didn't track it all across the police department's carpet. I nodded.

Elroy stood, then picked up the magazine he'd been reading. "Take this?"

My son wouldn't miss it. "Sure."

He stuffed the science fiction magazine in his jacket pocket and stepped past me. He turned at the door and looked back. "By the way," he said, "they recovered the slug."

"Thirty-eight?" I asked.

"Yep."

Jeremy Wilson's family had his body transported home when the Texarkana coroner's office finally released it. The mortician couldn't reconstruct his face, so the family held a graveside memorial service in Crawford.

Cassie Wilson attended her husband's funeral, accompanied by her father and Carvel, and I met her upon her return home, arriving as they were ascending the front steps. I followed Cassie into and through the house, admiring the way her hips moved in her widow's black dress.

She settled onto a love seat in the garden room and motioned me into a seat opposite her. A moment later Carvel brought drinks, then backed out of the room and closed the pocket doors.

"The police visited yesterday," Cassie said.

"And?"

She tasted her wine, then continued. "They asked questions, wanted to know how I'd gotten home."

"What did you tell them?" I slowly spun my tumbler of Jack-rocks in my hand.

"I told them I didn't know." She sipped at her wine. "I must have blacked out while Jeremy was beating me. Next thing I knew, I woke up in my own bed."

"They buy that?"

A smile played across Cassie's lips. "Had to," she said. "It was the only thing I was selling."

Even though I had already seen Cassie naked, something about the way the black dress clung to her figure and the way she touched her hair and wet her lips with the tip of her tongue affected me in a way that her blatant nudity hadn't. I felt my body respond and I shifted uncomfortably in my seat.

"And what are you selling now?" I asked. I placed my tumbler on the table, then stood.

Cassie stood, too, and stepped close enough I could feel the heat radiating from her body. She placed one hand on my right biceps, feeling the muscles beneath my jacket. The hint of a smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "I never thanked you proper."

She stretched upward and planted her lips on mine. I felt her warm breath against my cheek, saw her eyes half close, and then I pushed her aside.

I wiped her lipstick away with the back of my hand, then opened the pocket doors and left her standing in the garden room.

Masterson stopped me in the foyer.

"You married, Mr. Boyette?" Masterson asked.

"Once, long time ago."

"Kids?"

"One," I said. "A boy."

Masterson looked back toward the garden room, where Cassie now stood in the open doorway watching us. "Kids," he said. "They'll break your heart."

The next afternoon Lester Beeson had a job for me. He'd taken over Big Mac's Bail Bonds twenty-seven years earlier when a disgruntled client emptied a shotgun in Macdonald Pearson's face and he called on me whenever one of his clients jumped bail.

He tossed a Polaroid across the desk and I stared at the scarred face of a biker who'd spent time inside.

"Assault and battery. Assault with a deadly weapon. Attempted murder. Discharging a weapon within city limits. Littering."

I looked a question at him.

Lester shrugged. "He dropped the gun when he fled the scene."

Lester gave me Delbert "Deadwood" Woods's last known address and the addresses of his known associates.

"Like to have this one back," Lester said. "His mama stands to lose her house, and she's in the church choir with my mother. Won't make Sunday dinner a pleasant thing if one of my mother's friends comes up homeless."

I took the job and spent the afternoon on the phone, calling around until I found a mutual acquaintance who knew where to find Deadwood. Then I walked down the hall and offered Millie a few hours of evening work.

Just before eight P.M., we found Deadwood's Fatboy parked on the front lawn of a mobile home in Belmead. The single-wide belonged to an anemic blond stripper who earned extra money servicing some of the town's backsliding Baptists.

Millie stationed himself outside the mobile home's back door while I approached the front. I knocked but received no response. I tried the knob and found it locked. I stepped back, braced myself against the porch rail, and kicked.

The door crashed against an end table, knocking a lamp to the carpet and sending a gray tabby screeching past me and into the night.

From the back of the house, I heard a loud thud like a body falling to the floor and then a woman began crying. A door slammed open, heavy footsteps pounded halfway down the length of the mobile home, then another door crashed open and I heard the ringing sound of metal against flesh.

"Hey, Moe Ron," Millie shouted. "Come on back."

I followed the sound of Millie's voice and found him standing over the half naked body of Delbert Woods. Millie had found a shovel leaning against the back fence and had swung it like a baseball bat when Deadwood crashed out the back door, catching the bail jumping biker in the face with the flat of the shovel and dropping him to the ground.

'He was carrying this.' Millie handed me a Glock nine-millimeter and I tucked it into my belt at the small of my back.

We trussed up Deadwood, stuffed him into my car, and drove him downtown. While Millie walked him into the police station and answered a few questions, I tossed Deadwood's Glock into my glove box. When Millie finished, he rode with me to the tattoo parlor and slipped into his own car—a 1965 Mustang he'd rescued from a junkyard. I went to my office.

About time, a woman's voice said when I opened the door.

I snapped on the light. Cassie Wilson sat behind my desk, a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniel's on the desk and a nearly full shot glass in her hand. Her sheer white blouse had been half unbuttoned and she wore no bra.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

'Because I figured this is where you'd be,' she said. 'Sooner or later."

Cassie stood and stepped toward me. It could have been the drink or it could have been on purpose, but she stumbled and fell against me, her heavy breasts pressing against my chest as I wrapped my arms around her to keep her from falling. I smelled her shampoo, her perfume, and the Jack.

She tilted her head back. 'I didn't finish thanking you.'

I tried to stand her upright. Before I could, Cassie wrapped her hands around the back of my neck and pulled my face down to hers. At first I resisted, but when she covered my lips with hers, I surrendered.

She buried her tongue in my mouth and I sucked hard. As we

kissed, she peeled off my jacket, dropping it to the floor. I pushed Cassie away long enough to slip off my shoulder rig and hang it on the coatrack behind the door.

A few minutes later our clothes were strewn around my office and I had her bent over my knee.

"I've been bad," she said. "Very, very bad."

I spanked her naked ass again and again, so hard I left red palm prints on her pale white skin.

I liked it and knew I shouldn't. She liked it and didn't know any different.

Then I turned her over and pushed her onto the desk, spreading her legs and taking her hard and fast, spilling Jack Daniels on the carpet and sending paperwork flying all over the room.

Afterward, before I even had a chance to catch my breath, she dressed, finished the taste of Jack remaining in the overturned bottle, and left me sitting naked and spent in my leather office chair.

A moment later light from the alley behind the building brightened my entire office. I spun my chair around, lifted the corner of the window shade, and watched as Cassie slipped into the backseat of a silver Mercedes. I continued watching as Carvel drove the Mercedes out of the alley and around the corner.

Early the next afternoon two plainclothes officers from the Waco Police Department visited my office.

"When's the last time you visited Texarkana?" the tall one asked.

I told him.

"Purpose of your visit?"

"Professional," I said. "Picking up something for a client."

"There's a .38 registered in your name," the short one said. "Still got it?"

I opened my jacket and showed them the shoulder rig.

"Could you place it on the table, please? Use two fingers."

I lifted the revolver from my holster and placed it on my desk, covering a science fiction magazine that now smelled of Jack Daniel's.

"There was a guy killed in Texarkana the night you visited," the tall one said. "Shot in the head with a .38."

"I heard."

"Why didn't you come forward?" the short one asked.

I shrugged. "Lots of people in lots of places get shot with .38s. Don't have a thing to do with me."

"Mind if we take this?" the short one asked. He didn't wait for an answer. He wrapped a handkerchief around the revolver's handle, then lifted the gun and slipped it into a paper bag.

His partner issued me a receipt. "We'll run a few tests and get back to you."

"You do that," I said.

Millie brought a late lunch and we sat in my office eating wings and fries. When Elroy Johnson pushed the door open without knocking, Millie quickly excused herself and returned to the tattoo parlor up front.

"Now the doctor's not sure what he saw," Elroy said after closing the door. "Turns out the nurse's husband is a divorce attorney. Suddenly the doc don't want to admit where he was, who he was with, or what he was doing there."

"Too late," I said. "The cops've already been here."

"Tell them anything?"

I shook my head. "Nothing to tell."

Elroy fired up an unfiltered Camel, took a long drag, then let the smoke out through his nostrils. He pointed his cigarette at the science fiction magazine still on my desk. "You going to read that?"

"Take it." I pushed the magazine across the desk and Elroy picked it up.

"Jesus," he said. "Smells like you dipped it in whiskey."

"Close enough," I told him, remembering the bottle that had spilled while I fucked Cassie Wilson on my desk.

Cassie hadn't finished thanking me. The next night we drove downtown for Mexican food, then returned to my little brick two-bedroom home just off of New Road. I'd barely closed the door when she began tearing my clothes off.

I carried her to the bedroom, where we had hard, violent sex that left finger-shaped bruises on Cassie's breasts and hips and thighs where I'd clung to her. Afterward, I pushed myself off the bed and paced the bedroom, stealing glances at her as I thought.

She sat on the bed, leaning against the headboard, the sheet pooled at her waist.

"You like being slapped around," I told her.

Cassie didn't seem surprised by my revelation.

"But Jeremy went too far, didn't he?" I asked. "He began to like hitting you as much as you liked being hit."

She shrugged.

"Why did your father really send me after you?" I asked. "Why didn't he send that lapdog of yours?"

"Carvel?"

I lifted one corner of the shade. "He's out there right now, sitting in the Mercedes, waiting for you."

"Carvel's harmless."

"Then why the gun?"

"To protect my father's interests."

I turned toward her. "You?"

She lifted the sheet and tossed it aside, spreading her legs. "Think you can do it again?"

For a few minutes I forgot about the man outside.

Two hours later, dressed and standing in my living room, Cassie asked "You take anything else from the room that night?"

"Just you," I said. "That's all I was hired to do. Why?"

"My suitcase didn't make it home. The police didn't find it in the room with Jeremy."

"What was in it that's so important?"

"Clothes," she said. "Just clothes. Hate to have to replace them."

I didn't believe her. "Take you home?"

"Carvel's still out there," she said. "He'll take me."

I opened the door. Before Cassie could step outside, I pulled her into my arms and kissed her. She bit my bottom lip and I jerked away in surprise.

I tasted blood.

"I'm not the only one who likes pain," she whispered. Then she stepped through the open doorway and hurried down the walk to the waiting Mercedes.

"Jeremy was a bag boy, worked for her father," Elroy explained. We stood at Lion's Park, watching go-karts circle the track.

"Cassie know?"

Elroy shrugged. "Jeremy wanted a bigger piece of the action but couldn't figure out how to get it. Their little sex games went too far and he took his frustration out on his wife."

I waited.

"Then you showed up," he said.

"And screwed the pooch," I said. "Somebody's plans went all to hell when I pulled Cassie out of that motel room."

"Whose?" Elroy asked. "I thought we had things under control."

Richard Masterson moved money through one of Waco's smaller banks, an opportunity Elroy had presented to him many years earlier when Masterson's inability to cover bad bets had

jeopardized his position at the bank. Elroy had monitored the banker's activities ever since.

I'd been thinking about it for two days before I talked to Millie. "I need your help," I said, then explained what I needed.

I'd been fucking Cassie every night, and that night wasn't much different. We skipped dinner and went straight to my place. I slapped her around, getting her in the mood, then I stripped her and threw her on the bed. I had climbed on top of her when the phone rang.

I rolled off of Cassie and lifted the receiver. "Yeah?"

"I have it," Millie said. "How much longer?"

I glanced at Cassie. "Twenty minutes, tops."

"I'm on the way."

I dropped the telephone handset into its cradle.

Cassie pushed me onto my back and straddled me, her heavy breasts brushing my chest. "What was that?"

"Business," I said.

"Don't lie to me."

I grabbed her wrists, twisting until she grimaced in pain. Then I rolled her off of me and onto her back. She spread her legs and I buried myself deep inside her. Like before, the sex was hard and left us both bruised in places not usually shown to others.

Afterward, we dressed and I walked her to the door.

She stepped outside and hesitated on the front walk. Then she looked back at me. "Carver's not here."

"I'll phone a cab."

She looked up and down the street.

"That's not like Carver," she said. "He's never far from me."

Hours after the park had closed, I met Millie and Carver at Lovers Leap, overlooking the Brazos River in Cameron Park.

"What the fuck is this about?" Carver asked.

"Millie has the suitcase," I explained. I held my hand at my side, my fingers wrapped around Deadwood's Glock, the safety off and my finger resting lightly on the trigger. "He found it in your apartment."

"What suitcase?" Carvel stood next to the rock wall. He stepped back so he could watch both of us. He stopped when his ass touched the wall and he could go no farther.

"You were in Texarkana same time I was," I said. "You'd followed Cassie and Jeremy, protecting her father's interests. You saw me take her from the room. You saw how messed up she was."

Carvel's gaze darted from me to Millie and back. He wet his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"You knew we didn't have the suitcase so you went in after it," I continued. "So what happened? Did Jeremy surprise you, start to get up, what?"

Carvel shook his head.

"Doesn't matter why," I said. "You shot him."

Carvel charged.

I lifted the Glock and squeezed the trigger. A single bullet ripped into Carvel's chest and knocked him back onto the stone wall.

Millie walked up to the wall, pressed one boot against Carvel's side, and pushed. The body tumbled down the side of the cliff. Then Millie dropped Carvel's .38 over the side.

We left the silver Mercedes parked at Lover's Leap for the police to discover and Millie rode with me back to the office. Along the way, we stopped long enough to dispose of Deadwood's Glock.

Millie moved the suitcase from the tattoo parlor into my office, then he drove home. I drove up Austin Avenue to Masterson's house.

I leaned into the doorbell and waited until Masterson finally pulled the door open. He hadn't been expecting me and he wore gray sweatpants that he'd hurriedly pulled on before opening the door.

"Yes?"

Cassie appeared at the top of the stairs, saw me standing in the open doorway, and hurried down the steps to the foyer.

"Where's Carvel?" she demanded. She wore a red terry cloth robe that she held closed.

"He's with your husband."

Cassie slapped me. The robe gaped open and I took one last look at her naked body, seeing the bruises I'd left on her during our sex only a few hours earlier.

Masterson's eyes narrowed while he considered the implications of what I'd said. "Know anybody looking for work?" he asked. "Someone trustworthy."

"I think of anybody, I'll let you know."

Police found the abandoned Mercedes about the time dawn arrived in Waco, and a few hours later a jogger running along the riverfront path found Carvel's body. Over the course of the day the police found Carvel's .38 and the spent shell from Deadwood's Glock.

That afternoon, Elroy met me at my office and I handed him the suitcase Millie had found in Carvel's apartment.

"You clean on everything?" Elroy asked.

"Clean as I can be."

"The gun?"

"Bottom of the Brazos."

Elroy opened the suitcase and handed me a banded stack of hundred dollar bills. "Finder's fee," he said.

"What happened?"

"Jeremy planned to double cross his father-in-law," Elroy explained. "The money was for some of my associates in St. Louis. When Jeremy didn't show at the meet, they knew something had gone wrong. They wanted me to resolve the issue so I had a guy

lined up for the next day.' Elroy paused, pulled an unfiltered Camel from the pack in his shirt pocket, and lit it with a silver Zippo. After a long drag, he continued. 'Then you showed up, followed only a few minutes later by Carvel. Changed all my plans.'

Elroy carried the suitcase to the office door, then stopped and turned back.

'And give this to your kid next time you see him.' Elroy pulled the latest issue of one of the science fiction magazines from his pocket and tossed it on the desk. 'It's a good issue,' he said. 'Just don't spill nothing on it.'

I counted the money later and split it with Millie—thirty thousand for him, seventy thousand for me.

The lab later confirmed that Carvel Casey's .38 had killed Jeremy Wilson. Texarkana closed their file on the murder of Jeremy Wilson. Waco's file on Carvel Casey remains open but inactive. Richard Masterson disappeared one day after an intensive interview with local police, and I suspect that Elroy Johnson or his associates gave Masterson a one-way ticket to the bottom of Lake Waco. Cassie Masterson Wilson moved to L.A., where she started a members-only website for pain lovers. And my bruises finally healed.

Two days after finding Carvel's body, the police phoned to tell me the tests on my .38 had turned up negative and that I could retrieve the revolver at my convenience. They never did ask any more questions.

SEX CRIMES

Michael Garrett

The fifth corpse of the last six months, all men aged thirty to fifty, lay sprawled across the floor before me, facedown and naked below the waist. This one's longer-than-average blond hair lay matted and oily against the carpet, a silver ring in his left ear. His legs were lean and muscular, an exercise/health nut, I presumed. Didn't look so healthy at the moment, though. Gunpowder burns bruised the guy's inner thighs and blood oozed from between his legs just below the cheeks of his ass, soaking into the beige carpet. Without close inspection the guy appeared to have been shot in the asshole, but I wouldn't advise taking a closer look at *anybody's* asshole unless it was your job. If you did though, you'd see that the wound on this guy had been inflicted at point blank range, between his balls and his asshole while he was standing, the bullet's trajectory ripping through vital organs upward through his torso and lodging somewhere in the upper chest cavity or spine. No visible exit wound. Other than that, not much to go on, the place had been wiped clean.

Same M.O. as the others. Hell, if it ain't broke, why fix it? Each horny bastard had been receiving a blow job when a .38 had been jammed under his balls. Kind of gives "shooting your load" a whole new meaning, huh?

"Let's wrap this one up," I yelled to my partner in the next room. "My kid's got a soccer game in a couple of hours."

"Wouldn't want you to miss *that*," she answered in her usual

tone of sarcasm. She'd understand someday, though, when she had kids of her own.

The entire house was a shambles, dresser drawers hanging open with contents spilling out and scattered everywhere. Janice entered the room and slowly approached me, stepping over the guy's naked legs while taking care to avoid the spreading blood stain. Despite her killer looks, Jan was a real pro and always full of surprises. I never knew what to expect from her. Like now, for instance. Here I stood with a dead guy at my feet, with Jan facing me, unbuttoning her shirt. I've worked with female partners before, but never had one come on to me. And at a crime scene, no less. Shit. Jan obviously had a kinky side that seemed spooky even to *me*.

"You know, this ain't exactly the time or place for this," I said, but she had a smirky grin on her face.

"So when *else* do we ever get a chance, Mitch?" she said in a wispy voice. "You're always on the job or with that sweet little wife of yours. You've got to learn to unwind, mix business with pleasure sometimes."

She knew me pretty well. Pussy and profession go together like oil and water. I gave a weak laugh and shrugged, figuring she was just jerking me around. "We got a job to finish," I said.

She ignored my comment and slipped out of her shirt, then quickly dropped her bra to the floor. My tongue probably hit the carpet at about the same time. I ain't exactly a ladies' man and I wasn't used to this. Her tits sprang forward, her nipples aimed at me like the tiny barrels of two snub-nosed revolvers. What the hell had gotten into her? She didn't realize it, but she was about to fuck herself out of a job. I was *one* guy who could resist the temptation. Hell, a sexual distraction could get us both killed. As I exhaled in frustration, she wiggled out of her pants and stumbled toward me. I caught her just in time before her hands

grabbed a floor lamp for support, the smell of liquor rising from her lips.

"Hey! See what you almost did?"

She looked at me with a pout I'd never seen in her before.

"You would've grabbed the fucking lamp if I hadn't stopped you!" I continued. She rolled her eyes, and that pissed me off. "Listen to me!" I scolded her. "I got no problem with female partners. Truth is, I kinda like 'em. But you're a rookie at this, and you gotta listen to me. You *never* drink on the job, and you *never* touch anything at a crime scene. *Never!*"

She grinned at me as I stood her back on her feet, and before I could say anything else, her panties hit the floor, too. "Does that include touching *you*?" she purred. "You're at the crime scene . . ."

"What the hell's gotten into you?" I said with a sigh of exasperation. "You know better than this."

I've got to admit, not only did her tits look great, but she looked pretty damn good all over. It's amazing how much better a woman looks when she's naked. Well, *most* women, anyway. And it's equally unbelievable how quickly my dedicated work concentration could slide to the carpet with her panties. She wrapped her arms around me and planted one right on my lips. Her tongue poked around in search of mine, and I decided to reciprocate.

She broke the kiss, then nodded toward the stiff on the floor. "He won't tell anybody."

I'm not exactly sure what came over me then, but I know my dick had something to do with it. I remember thinking for an instant we could go to a motel, but that would be just as distracting. Besides, there was something about doing it right there in front of the corpse that seemed to turn her on. She dropped to her knees, unbelted and unzipped me, and let my pants and shorts drop to my feet. Before I could say anything else, my dick

was deep inside her throat and I was no longer in the mood to talk.

As the sensation between my legs increased, I glanced around the room one more time. What could possibly be turning her on in a setting like this? The dead guy? The danger of us both being busted? I'd suspected something was a bit different about her, but never dreamed it could be anything like *this*. Damn!

She looked up at me with her big brown eyes and I wondered how a cute young thing like her ever got into such a rough line of work. She sure didn't look the part, but was definitely a wolf in sheep's clothing. She had an aura of innocence about her that could fool the pope, petite with long honey-blond hair, but hard as nails on the inside. She was shrewd, a damn good partner and one helluva cocksucker — a potentially deadly combination.

I was ready to shoot my load when I felt cold metal jam hard behind my balls. It hurt like hell, but not as much as the accompanying sound of the hammer being cocked.

She removed me from her mouth. I was limp as a noodle all of a sudden, anyway. "Ever wonder how it feels when one of these guys gets a new asshole?" she said.

She eyed me with an evil grin and a long lock of blond hair hanging between her eyes. For a moment I thought it was just a gag, just her warped sense of humor, but when I tried to move she jabbed the barrel against me harder. 'I always pull the trigger when the first spurt of cum hits the roof of my mouth. The force of the gunshot makes his dick vibrate a little and it tickles. The shot makes the cum shoot out harder, too.' She paused as if I'd say *oh, really?* But I didn't feel like talking, this time for a *different* reason. "The sound of the blast is rough on my ears, but I'm used to it now," she went on.

What could I say?

'I never knew it could feel so good to have such power over a

man," she bragged. "How does it feel on the other end of the barrel?"

I ignored her stupid question. For some reason I'll never understand, the thought occurred to me of how ridiculous I must've looked, standing there with my pants around my ankles, my dick hanging limp, and my balls hugging the barrel of a fucking gun.

"Don't make me add you to the list, Mitch," she hissed. "You're my partner. I really don't want to, so don't push me."

And I knew she would, too. If she whacked all these other guys without a care, she could easily do the same to me.

Hopefully you'll never know how vulnerable a guy can feel with a gun dimpling his groin behind his nuts. There ain't a helluva lot you can do, other than a short, persuasive speech. I wished I had listened to more of those motivational speakers to know what would be best to say at a time like this.

"Why are you doing this?" was all I could think of, but it seemed a reasonable question at the time. I never would've expected this from her in a million years. She and I were partners, for Christ's sake, and there's an unwritten allegiance in a partnership that's implicit—a common trust never to be broken.

She shoved the barrel a little harder until I was standing on my tiptoes as if I were balancing my crotch on a pinpoint. I was sweating and counting the seconds. "You've taught me a lot," she continued. "Nobody knows a crime scene like you. But after a while, you know, I just started thinking."

She paused and lashed her tongue out briefly to tease the head of my dangling dick. I never dreamed a beautiful pair of lips at my rod could be so fucking scary. "You taught me so well that I don't really *need* you anymore," she finished.

I chuckled weakly, trying to keep my balance. My legs were stiffer than my dick had been. I knew the slightest movement could nudge her trigger finger. I carefully wiped sweat from my forehead and looked down at her. "*Everybody* needs a partner."

was all I could come up with at the moment. Smooth-talking has never been one of my better attributes.

I tried to read her expression, but her face was cold and void of one. There she was, on her knees looking up at me. I couldn't see the gun—it was between my legs—but her tits stuck out below her uplifted face and, let me tell you, take away the revolver and I would've been in heaven.

Jan kept the gun barrel tightly in place and repositioned her legs to sit on the floor. 'I finally realized,' she continued, "that I do all the work and *you* get all the credit."

'What the hell do you mean?' I answered. 'We're fucking *partners*—fifty-fifty all the way!"

She laughed. "Is that right?" she said with another note of sarcasm. "Well, let me see. I can either pull the trigger or we can renegotiate."

Finally a light at the end of the tunnel, but I knew she didn't have much time. 'Whatever you say, sweetheart," I said. "There ain't a lot of leverage on my side of the bargaining table."

A pair of sirens screamed in the distance. 'Seventy-five twenty-five?' she offered with a smile.

"You got it!" I agreed.

She pulled the trigger and the hammer clicked shut. The fucking chamber was empty. Like I said, she's a tough one on the inside. I couldn't be too pissed at her, though. Pulling off our scheme required a woman with guts of steel, and it was paying off handsomely for both of us.

'Let's get out of here,' I said as I pulled up my pants and zipped up. She hurried into her clothes and headed me off as I reached for the dead guy's wallet and coke we'd stashed by the door.

"Not anymore," she said. "If I've got to target every mark and pull the trigger, *I'll* carry the goods, too, from now on."

Smart girl, I thought with a shrug. Maybe blondes ain't so dumb after all.

MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE

Marthayn Pelegrimas and Robert J. Randisi

"Oh, yeah, baby, yeah. There. Right there. Mmm, I love when you do that to me!"

This was the best part of making love for Mick. The listening. As he lifted his head from between Brenda's thighs, he looked up to see her breasts. Running his hands along her thighs, up across her soft belly, he reached to pinch those hard nipples. Her body shivered. Feeling her respond to him that way drove him up onto his knees. But it was the moan from deep down inside her throat, the pleas she groaned, that drove him to be inside of her.

Mick Stanley loved everything about women. He loved their smell. Anytime of the year—or month. He inhaled their fragrance and sometimes got more excited than when he was actually touching them. Their skin, so soft, he could glide his fingers across miles of skin for hours and hours. Their hair, no matter what color, was their shimmering crown. It shined and glistened, begging him to touch. He loved the care women took. Lotions, perfumes, soaps, fruit-scented shampoos, manicures, pedicures—all the hours spent working to please him. Each of them showing him how much she cared about what he thought. Pampering spots only he would see. All that work just for him.

But still the words were the best. Sometimes there were compliments spoken in code. Or warnings. I've been hurt, be careful, don't bring up the bad memories, be sweet to me or else. It took

several dates to get to the good stuff. The words that taught him
Made him a better man.

"What the fuck can you learn from a broad like Brenda?"

Mick studied his friend for a moment. "Can you honestly tell me you're that dense?"

"Hey, man, no need to get insulting. I just can't believe you're serious about this bullshit."

Mick leaned back in his chair and picked up his drink. How could he get through to this mouth breather? And did he really want to? Yes, he decided after a moment. Sam needed his guidance.

"What's the most important thing in this world?" he asked, taking a new approach.

"You kiddin'? Pussy, man. What else is there?" Mick watched Sam's grin practically swallow up his face.

"And when was the last time you got any?"

Sam thought a moment. "Umm, last ..."

"Last week? Last month? Try last year."

"Who the fuck made you scorekeeper?" Sam shoved his beer away from him.

Mick liked Sam. He hadn't known him that long, and they weren't great friends, but for the past few months they had gotten into the habit of stopping for a beer after work. He didn't want to offend the guy, so he stared down at the table, tracing his finger around a water mark.

"You know, it's not like you're George Clooney or some guy like that. Look at yourself before you criticize me."

Mick knew this was Sam's way of making himself feel better and sat silently while Sam continued.

"You're short ... what, five feet eight ... on a good day?"

"Nine."

"And your hair. All that stuff you put in it."

"Gel."

"Whatever. It makes you look like you got rained on or something. No offense, man, but you're not exactly Mr. Universe."

"I know that," Mick said without rancor.

Sam's mood suddenly changed, became less defensive as he sat forward and asked, "So why do you get all the chicks? How's come every time we leave this place you come away with at least three numbers in your pocket?"

"I listen," Mick said.

"Come again? You . . . listen?"

"That's what I said."

Sam stared hard at Mick. "What the fuck do you listen to?"

"Women. They'll tell you anything you want to know if you'll just stop and hear them."

Sam laughed. "Oh sure, like I give a crap about what kind of jeans make their ass look smaller. Or what soap operas they watch, or—"

"Hold it. When you're making love, do you listen to what she's saying?"

"Hell no, man, I'm too busy takin' care of business, ya know?"

Mick couldn't believe how thick this guy was. He tried again. "Before sex, during, after, you gotta listen to what they're telling you."

"Who's got time for all that shit when there's fuckin' to be done?"

"Apparently you should."

Sam fell back in his chair. "Mold me, O great master."

Now, this was going to be fun. "Okay. Let's say you're sitting with a girl in front of the TV, watching a movie or something. You put your arm around her and start to make out."

"That's when they always say to slow down," Sam complained.

"Do you?"

"Naw, they're just tryin' to be cute. We both know why we're there."

"Are you sure about that?"

"To get laid, baby, that's what the whole song and dance is about."

"It is a song and dance, Sam, but I think you're doing the steps at different clubs than they are—humming different songs."

"Okay," Sam said, "so she says slow it down. Now what?"

"Are you retarded or what?" Mick asked. "When they say slow down, you slow down! Listen, it's like we're jumbo jets circling the airport and the chicks are the landing crew. All you gotta do is follow their signals. Keep your eyes and ears open. They'll bring you right in for a landing, every time."

If that idiot Sam couldn't even get the basics through his thick skull, there was no way in hell he would have understood that Mick learned something invaluable from every woman he had ever been with. Sexually and platonically.

His very first date had been with that little blonde who lived across the alley, Darlene DeYoung. He was twelve and she was eleven. Her mother had driven them to the movies.

When he suggested they sit in the last row, he almost peed his damn pants when she agreed. And when he got his arm around her, he thought he had it made. But when he went in for a kiss, she turned away, stuffing popcorn into her mouth. At first he had been embarrassed. Then mad. By the time the movie was over and his arm was nothing but a dead weight, he hadn't cared if he hurt her feelings.

"So what's your problem?" he had asked. "You don't like me or what?"

She didn't take her eyes off the cartoon and he remem-

bered how pretty she looked in the glow of the light from the screen.

"I like you fine."

"Then why can't I kiss you?"

"My mom told me that only whores kiss on the first date."

It had never entered his mind that anyone other than the two of them were involved on that date. But the relief he felt knowing she liked him and he hadn't done anything wrong gave him courage.

"Do you believe everything your mother tells you?"

She'd looked at him like he was suddenly speaking Swahili.

"Why wouldn't I?"

And that was his first lesson. Dates came preprogrammed.

By the time he started dating Charlene Hill, the last year of college, he could count ten lessons learned, fifteen girls bedded, and hundreds of near misses. He felt qualified enough to teach a course. But then Brenda happened, and they had now been together a couple of years.

"You'll never guess what happened at work today." She was talking to him from the bathroom. He'd started reading the new PI novel he'd picked up, but closed the cover to give her his undivided attention.

"What?"

She came to the doorway, wearing only a see-through nightie. While she brushed her hair, her pink-tipped breasts jiggled beneath the filmy material. Mick smiled thinking how delicious she always tasted.

"This bitch comes in with a pair of shoes she bought two years ago. Can you believe it? She'd been wearing them for two fuckin' years."

"So what did she want you to do?"

Brenda tossed the brush onto the bathroom counter, flipped out the lights, and walked across the bedroom to sit next to Mick.

"She said we were selling the same shoes in the designer department and the price was cheaper than she had paid two years ago. The damn things were scuffed; the heels were worn down. I politely told her that there was nothing we could do since she'd obviously gotten two years' worth of wear out of them."

"And?"

"She wanted a refund."

Mick never got it—how some people felt more entitled than the rest. How those people walked around barking out demands while the whole world (himself included) stood back and watched. He hated them but envied them at the same time.

Tossing his book onto the floor, Mick slid back against the headboard, crossed his arms, and asked, "A refund? After all that time?"

"Yes. Can you believe it?"

"Well, what did you tell her?"

Brenda slid closer to Mick. "I told her there was nothing I could do. Case closed."

"Good for you. That should have—"

"Then she demanded to see Mr. Woodson."

"He always tells you he'll back your decision. Right?" Mick asked.

"That's what he says. So I buzzed his office and he came down. He was wearing his black suit, the pinstriped one—he looked like a hit man. I thought the old biddy would be intimidated—just a little."

"But she wasn't?"

"Not one bit. She started in before I could explain anything. She pointed and yelled and waved those damn shoes in his face

But Woodson kept his cool. Just nodded and smiled. Like he was hanging on every syllable."

"So he backed you up?" Mick asked.

"Not only did he *not* back me up, but he personally escorted her to the shoe department and told her to pick out any pair she wanted."

"What?"

Brenda jumped off the bed, aggravated, her breasts bobbling enticingly. She paced the small bedroom.

"I was so embarrassed. And mad. I told that gutless wonder that I couldn't understand how he could cave in like that. How every customer who walks through the door can make outrageous demands and he'll always give in to them."

"And he denied it," I said.

"Of course. So I asked him how the store could operate like that—giving away money to any lunatic who screamed loud enough. He said complaints like that were rare, and to take back the shoes represented a two percent charge off. The old bitch's future business would amount to much more."

Mick shook his head. "So what happened to the shoes—the old ones?"

"Woodson told me to take care of them and I marched down to the basement and threw them into a Dumpster. I know he needs them to send back to Des Moines with a return slip, but let him figure out how to do that. Dammit, I know it's all a matter of numbers, but doesn't anyone have any kind of morals anymore? What the hell's wrong with people?" Brenda stopped at the foot of the bed, looking to Mick for an answer. "Well? Am I the only one who gives a shit?"

Mick held his arms out to her. "Come here, baby."

She smiled at him, slid the straps over her shoulders, and let the nightie fall to the floor. Her breasts were full with very round undersides, firm and smooth. Looking at them never failed to

make his mouth water. She kicked the nightie away before crawling onto the bed with him, snuggling up against his chest.

"That's the best thing about you, Mick. You listen to me. You care."

He kissed her gently. First on top of the head, then across her forehead to her mouth. "I'm here for you, Brenda. I care about everything you care about." And he meant every word.

More than two weeks had passed since Sam and Mick met up for a drink. Summer was heating up July, and with vacations getting in the way of schedules and routines, the two men kept missing each other.

"So? Where you been keeping yourself?" Mick asked as he returned to the table with their beers.

"Oh, this chick and I went up to the lake for a week."

Mick raised his eyebrows. "A vacation with a woman? This from the man who couldn't even get a date a few weeks ago?"

"I know." Sam looked proud of himself. "I thought a lot about what you said. So I slowed things down. I concentrated on what the broad—girl—was saying and she really dug me. Said I was sensitive. Can you believe it? Me. A caring, kind guy. Who da thought?"

"And the sex?" Mick asked.

"Man." Sam rubbed his hands together. "Unbelievable. Fuckin unreal. It's like we connected in every spot of our bodies. It was like we were on fire."

"So what's this woman's name?"

"Denise. She works in our building, down on three. Mick, I tell you, I feel like I can do anything. Full of confidence."

"Maybe you're just learning what it's like to be a grown-up."

"Ya think?" Sam asked, puzzled. "Huh, I never thought about it."

"So what now?"

"What do you mean?"

Mick laughed. 'With Denise. Are you two serious?'

'Oh, I suppose she is, but I'm just getting started. Now that I know the secret . . ."

"Secret?" Mick asked. "What's the secret behind being a decent person and caring about the person you're with?'

Sam sat back. 'I don't believe you! I tell you I take your advice, that it works great for me, and you're mad? Come on, man, you gave me this power, I'm gonna use it!'

Mick took a good long look into Sam's vacant eyes. There might as well have been a For Rent sign hanging in each blue orb. "Naw, I'm not mad. Never mind.'

Mick picked up his beer and took a slow swig from the cold bottle. Maybe Brenda was right. Maybe no one had morals anymore. Just out to get what they could get. Damn the consequences.

"So I thought we were going to try that new Chinese place tonight,' Mick said into the phone.

'Sorry, babe. Brenda said, 'you know how crazy things get around this place just before a sale. Tomorrow's a biggie. I gotta stay and help get things ready."

"But what about—"

"You're on your own for dinner. Sorry. Love ya."

Mick listened to the silence a minute before hanging up. He should enjoy the next few hours he was going to spend alone. Think of them as an extra bonus instead of dead space.

He picked through the mail. Nothing good except a video catalog he'd look over later. He grabbed the remote and plopped down in front of the big screen. After checking out all twenty movie channels he decided he wasn't in the mood to concentrate on anything. When his stomach growled, he went for his jacket,

thinking he'd walk down the street to the Chinese restaurant and bring home some takeout. Have it waiting for Brenda. She'd be hungry when she got home—she was always hungry. Sweet and-sour pork was her favorite. She could heat it up when she got home. Pleased with his own thoughtfulness, he locked the door behind him and headed for the elevator.

Funny how a town he'd lived in his entire life could look different from an unfamiliar angle. As Mick walked through the neighborhood, then turned down a side street he'd never had occasion to visit before, the restaurant he was expecting to find in the middle of the block was not there. It was a glorious evening and he was enjoying the fresh air. He shrugged and continued at a leisurely pace down the block. It wasn't as if Chinese food was hard to find in this city.

A newsstand stood on the far corner and he walked over to buy the evening paper. As he was waiting for change he caught sight of Brenda's new coat. It wasn't that hard to miss. Always conscious of the latest trends, she'd recently purchased a lime green trench coat. When she'd asked his opinion, he'd opted for the polite way out. Instead of telling her that he thought she looked like a piece of Day-Glo fruit, he'd said she would be easy to spot in a crowd. And he certainly had been right. There she was. Shoving the coins in his pocket and the paper under his arm, he hurried to catch up with her.

She was alone and Mick wondered if she'd stepped out for a break. She didn't seem in any sort of hurry. He enjoyed watching how her hips swayed and her hair shined every time the setting sun lit up a flyaway curl. He inhaled, just about ready to shout for her to stop when her head suddenly snapped to the right, her attention obviously caught by someone Mick couldn't see. She smiled, waved, and dashed into a sleazy diner.

It hadn't been Mick's intention to stalk his girlfriend, he was more concerned with making her happy. At least that's what he told himself later. But as he ran to make sure that the woman was, in fact, Brenda, he could feel his heart racing from more than the exertion. Because if Mick had only been curious, he would have gone inside that dirty little restaurant instead of standing outside, straining to peek through the dirt and grease-stained windows. Despite the impediment, though, he was able to see that the woman was Brenda. She was sitting there laughing and talking to some asshole across the table from her. No, if Mick really loved Brenda, he would have given her the benefit of the doubt instead of pronouncing her guilty right then and there. And while he struggled with the choices open to him — confront her, trust her, walk away, run home — he stood watching her face and the man's back for more than an hour.

When the couple finally appeared to be getting ready to leave, Mick ducked around the corner. His heart still pounding, his mouth dry, he wanted nothing more now than to see the man's face. Feeling like a character out of a cheap thriller, he unfolded the newspaper and held it up in front of his face.

'I'll call you later,' Brenda was saying as she kissed the guy on the cheek.

"Mick won't be home?"

He's usually in bed by twelve. I'll call around one.

Mick lowered the paper for a second.

'I'll be waiting, babe.' Sam said, his smile more confident than Mick had ever seen.

'So?' Mick asked Sam. 'How's it hangin'?'

'Better than ever, my friend. Better than you'll ever know.' Sam's new confidence was now taking on the appearance of pure

arrogance to Mick. Of course that might have been because Mick now knew that he and Brenda were seeing each other behind his back.

'Who's the lucky lady this week?'

Sam grinned. 'Ahh, no one you'd know.'

'So,' Mick said, 'I guess you've taken all you need from me.'

'You know what they say.' Sam said with another shit-eating grin. 'When the student surpasses the teacher he's ready to start teachin'."

'And is that what you've done? Surpass me?" Mick asked.

"Looks that way."

Sam picked up his beer, studying the man across the table from him.

Her neck smelled like vanilla and it was all Mick could do to keep from biting into it.

'I love you, Mick.' Brenda purred as he pushed deep inside her.

He grunted, thrusting not only his body but his anger into her. "I love you, too."

'Slow down, baby,' she said, looking up at him. 'What's wrong? You seem... different tonight.'

"I am different."

She reached up to pull him closer but he locked his arms and pushed his hips more violently, wanting to tear her apart, kill her, pound her to death. It had taken him a few days but he'd finally decided that she was the one he hated the most. Sam, after all, was just being Sam, being a man. The betrayal, after all, had come from Brenda.

'Honey, stop it! You're hurting me.'

His ears ached with a ringing. His head hurt. When he finally came, she was hysterical.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" she screamed. Pushing his sweaty body off her, she got off the bed and headed for the bathroom.

The door slammed and he lay there in the darkness, staring up toward the ceiling, knowing that fears about sustaining his anger had been a gigantic waste of time. The hatred he felt chewing up his insides and inflaming his lungs and heart wasn't going away.

He sat up and felt in the darkness for his boxers. Pulling them on, he walked to the kitchen. The refrigerator light was the only illumination in the room when Brenda came up behind him.

"You know, don't you?" she asked. "That's the only reason I can come up with for what just happened."

Mick pushed the refrigerator door all the way open so it wouldn't creep shut. "How long?"

"With Sam?"

Mick shook his head in disbelief. "Have there been more?"

"No, of course not. This thing with Sam just sort of ... happened. I don't know." She shrugged. "It was different, something exciting. That's all."

Her attitude incensed him even more and as he gripped the counter, his hand felt for the first knife.

Brenda reached out to hug him. "You're always so good to me, Mick." She held him tightly around the waist. "So goddamn, fuckin good. Sometimes I feel like I should be kneeling down, praying to St. Michael. Do you have any idea how unworthy your goodness makes me feel?"

He stood frozen in her grasp, not returning the embrace. "I was wondering how you'd turn this all around to be my fault. Didn't I ever make you happy?"

"Most of the time. Come on"—she smiled up at him—"we can get through this. The main thing is we love each other, right?"

'Right." She was still smiling as he stabbed her in the back. Her knees buckled and she fell to the floor, stunned.

The cutlery set held six knives, all of different lengths and shapes. He dropped the one he had used and went for another. That one he used to stab her twice through the chest. He must have gotten her lungs because she lay there wheezing. Clutching his sleeve, she tried to scream but couldn't seem to move or speak.

The last knife he used to slit her throat but she had been dead long before then.

It wasn't as if he had to wash his fingerprints off anything. That was the beauty of it. He lived there, for chrissake. The place was plastered with both their prints. But washing the knives was another thing.

Slamming the refrigerator door shut, he flipped on the overhead fluorescent lights and shoved the knives along with the plastic holder into the dishwasher. After filling the cup with soap and turning the appliance on, he went to the bathroom to clean himself up before going back to bed.

The salesgirl was busy talking to a tall manager, a young guy with spiked blond hair and one diamond earring. Mick strolled the aisle, taking his time, catching bits of their conversation. She was telling the guy how she'd recently broken up with her boyfriend because he was so thoughtless. "Men," she whined, "are all pigs. All they care about is football and sex." After a few more exchanges the manager noticed Mick and nodded in his direction.

"Hi, can I help you find something?" the clerk asked. Her smile sparkled with braces.

"I have a return." He held up the bag with the store's logo printed across brown paper in purple.

"We'll have to go over to the register," she said brightly.

He followed her to a quiet corner of the housewares department.

"Was there something wrong with your [illegible]?"

"Cutlery set," he said, taking the pack of knives out of the bag.

She opened the box and inspected its contents. "It looks brand new."

"Oh it is," he said. "I bought it a few days ago but my wife already had one." He looked sheepishly at her and smiled disarmingly. "I was just trying to help out and it looks like all I did was cause trouble."

She returned his smile, putting the knives back into the box. Then she reached under the counter for the appropriate form and started filling in item codes. "At least you tried," she said consolingly. "That's more than most guys do."

"I guess. So there's no problem with this?"

"Oh no," she said. "The store has a very liberal return policy. Do you know that some people will try to bring things back a year or two after they buy them?" She leaned toward him and lowered her voice. "And if they're good customers and they make a fuss, sometimes they get away with it."

"I know," he said. "I've heard that." Listening to everything women say really *had* been very educational.

"I'll need your receipt."

"It should be in the bag."

"Here it is." As she inspected the small piece of paper, he checked his watch.

It was nine A.M. The store had only been open for a few minutes when he walked in, so the department was empty. When he was done here, all he had to do was go to work and then return home to discover the body and call the police.

'Do you want to look around for something in exchange, or would you just like the refund?'

"Is it all right if I just take cash?'

'Of course,' she said. 'We have a money-back guarantee when you're not satisfied with the item.'

But I was satisfied, he thought, very satisfied.

A HATFUL OF RALPH

Loren D. Estleman

"Santa, guess what?"

Ralph Poteet, sweating in a heavy red velour suit that hadn't been cleaned since its last inhabitant and wearing an itchy white fake beard smelling of someone else's halitosis, adjusted his lap to accommodate the pretty eleven-year-old brunet. "What, little girl?"

She whispered in his ear. "I'm not wearing any underpants."

"Okay, I quit." He stood up, dumping the girl to the floor. She opened a mouth the size of a dump truck and bawled. Her mother, a beige blonde in an orange plaid coat and mukluks, roared a blasphemy and charged up the red-carpeted aisle to Santa's throne, swinging a plastic tote bag at Ralph's head. She had just made a purchase at the dumbbell counter in Sporting Goods. When Ralph regained consciousness, Mr. Wax, the manager, was standing over him.

"My office, Poteet."

In the little room behind layaway, Mr. Wax folded his pudgy pink hands on his desk. He was built along the lines of a waterfowl, with a sleek head and a big belly, upon which lay two feet of old-fashioned gold watch chain.

"This is your third incident, Poteet. I should have known you were trouble when you conducted a strip search on that woman in Housewares because you thought she was shoplifting ice buckets."

"Who knew she was really pregnant? That scam's older than Bob Dole."

"Then you insulted a customer in Ladies' Lingerie."

"All I said was apricot isn't his color."

"You're not a salesclerk, and you're certainly no one's idea of Santa Claus. Turn in the suit to Spreadeyle in Customer Relations. The pillow, too."

"I ain't wearing a pillow."

"I engaged your undercover services as a private detective to investigate employee theft, which costs this store thousands annually. If the customers you've offended bring suit, we'll wind up paying out three times that amount in legal fees and damages. Meanwhile, you have yet to report a single theft."

"These things take time."

"Olive trees take less time. If and when you ever do catch someone, there won't be anything left to steal. It will all belong to the litigants."

"I know a lawyer can fix anything. He hangs out by the runway at the Purple Snatch downtown."

"I'm going to recommend to Mr. Goering we replace you with a reputable agency. Preferably one that doesn't advertise on a place mat at the House of Pork."

Ralph tried whining. He'd given his retainer to Vinnie "the Finger" Colostomo as insurance against a broken tibia and owed his roommate his half of two months' rent. The roommate was a performer with the Mexican Wrestling League. "You can't can me. I'm close to a pinch."

"Thank you. I'd forgotten the incident outside the changing room in Swimwear."

"Gimme a week. If I don't come through, I'll waive expenses."

"You waved good-bye to expenses when the woman in Swimwear threw you into fine china." Mr. Wax smoothed back his sleek hair, then sniffed his palm. "I'll let you have until the end of the day. Report to Miss Luger in Maintenance. If there are no results by closing time, or if there's one more episode,

you're out, and you can have this Snatch fellow sue us for your fee. You can stand in line behind the mother of that little girl you dropped on Santa's floor."

"Maybe I'll sue them, too, for sexual harassment and dumbbell assault."

"I'm not sure the second thing is against the law."

"I meant *with* a dumbbell." Ralph jingled out.

Miss Luger was a six foot former East Berliner who had won a bronze medal in the women's shot put at Munich in 1972, and hung on to it in a split decision following a physical examination to determine whether she was a woman. Ralph thought if she ever untied the bun at the back of her head, her breasts would fall to her feet. She looked him up and down through the sparkling lenses of her steel-rimmed glasses and said, "Forty two short."

"I get a suit? What am I, like a floorwalker?"

"More like a floor scrubber. Toilets, too." She plopped a folded pair of blue coveralls onto the wooden counter. "Put them on and grab a lightbulb from the stockroom. There's one burned out in the shoe department. Forty watts, not a hundred. We aren't made of money."

The coveralls read GOERING'S DEPARTMENT STORE in big yellow letters across the back. On his way to the stockroom, Ralph caught a glimpse of himself in a full length mirror. He looked like a Smurf.

The stockroom was as dim as a Romanian outhouse, lit as it was by forty watt bulbs. He groped along the rows of steel utility shelves, found a box of lightbulbs made in the Republic of Kazakhstan, scooped one out in its flimsy cardboard sleeve, and turned back toward the door. He stopped when he heard moaning.

Ralph prided himself on his professional instincts. Just as a big game hunter knew a lion from a leopard by the sound of its

roar and an airplane mechanic knew which gasket had to be replaced in a jet engine by the pitch of its whine. Ralph knew the noises made by a woman approaching orgasm. He had amused himself outside the door of many a room at the Acre of Ecstasy Motel with one ear to the panel and one finger on the shutter release of his Instamatic, timing his entrance by the sound from within so he could capture on film a philandering spouse at the moment of climax. He could write a book on the subject, if he could only spell.

The sound was coming from the back of the room. He turned and crept that way on the balls of his feet. On the floor behind a stack of Costa Rican camcorders, the pale dimpled rear end of a man who would never be asked to tape a commercial for a private health club glowed dimly under forty watts of light, rutting and quivering between a pair of naked thighs that looked familiar. Ralph tipped his head to one side and looked into the face, distorted with pain or pleasure or a combination of both, of Heather Hardy, who had returned to the sales counter recently after a brief stint in green tights as Santa's number one elf. She had the petite build of a Miss Teenage America, and a surprisingly effective left hook, as Ralph had learned when he'd asked if she'd mind if he climbed down her chimney some night.

Ralph leaned close to the graying head of the man with his pants bunched around his ankles. "I gotta know. Did you duck the first time, or was it, you know, love at first sight?"

Heather screamed, but that might not have had anything to do with Ralph. The man jerked his head around, mouth gaping like a carp's, and Ralph recognized Austin Healy, the head floor walker.

Ralph left, leering. When he entered the shoe department, Mr. Klompen, the senior clerk, was struggling to pry a man's foot into a size 8½ Hush Puppy. The man's buttocks spilled over the sides of the generous chair and his ankle was turning blue. Ralph

asked where the bulb was that needed replacing. Mr Klompen tilted his streaming bald head in the direction of the ceiling, where a dark frosted panel showed among its illuminated neighbors. The ceiling was fifteen feet high.

"I'm gonna need a ladder."

"No shit. I mean, no kidding." Mr. Klompen aimed a tortured obsequious grin at the customer, who was too busy making faces to go with his choked circulation to have heard what he'd said. "There's one in the stockroom."

In the stockroom Ralph met Heather Hardy on her way out. "So how's that Healy handle?" he asked.

When he regained consciousness, he felt cold air. The fire door to the alley drifted shut.

Ralph's one good eye was swollen and tender. More blind than before, he felt his way to the fire door and tugged it open in time to see Austin Healy lower a heavy-looking box into the open trunk of a steel gray BMW and slam down the lid. Ralph closed the door before Healy could turn and see him.

Ralph returned to the shoe department, carrying a stepladder and glowering. He'd caught a break, but stealing merchandise *and* nooky seemed like too much on the side of tall guys in good suits.

Mr. Klompen had gotten his customer into the shoe. He sat back on his stool, puffing and glaring at Ralph. "What are you waiting for, another bulb to blow? Climb up and change it."

Ralph was poised with one foot on the bottom step. "I ain't too good with heights."

"From what I hear, you're not much better at ground zero."

"Do you have anything smaller?" the customer asked.

"Sir, *I* have, but you haven't."

Ralph climbed the ladder. The panel had to be pushed up and shoved away from the grid. He tucked the lightbulb under one arm and pushed. A mouse plopped onto his face. He blew it away.

with a gusty 'Shit!' and dropped the bulb. The bulb turned over twice and exploded when it struck the floor. The mouse landed on its feet and scurried off, and for the next thirty seconds Ralph could track its progress through the store by the shrieks and crashes.

He climbed back down. At the bottom he almost stepped on Uncle Ray Grizzard, the store's eighty-nine-year-old security guard. Uncle Ray lay on his back beside the shattered lightbulb with his Frontier Colt in his right hand and his left clutching his chest. Mr. Klompen bent over him and pried back each of his eyelids. His fat customer stood swaying like a tethered dirigible in his Hush Puppies.

Mr. Klompen straightened, shaking his head at Ralph. 'You almost hit him. I guess he thought the place was being stuck up.'

'For an old fart he was pretty slick on the draw.'

In the little room behind layaway, Mr. Wax looked at his gold watch and returned it to his vest pocket. 'Two hours till closing. Shame. I had five o'clock in the pool.'

'It was that fucking mouse,' Ralph said. 'I'm a detective, not an exterminator.'

'You did a pretty good job exterminating Uncle Ray. He was this store's most beloved employee for sixty years. We were going to give him a cuckoo clock when he retired.'

'Whose idea was that, his cardiac specialist's?'

'You're fired, Poteet. Of course.'

'I got a lead on the thief.'

'What you've got is your walking papers. We'll lose you and keep the thief.'

'What about my fee?'

'I'm donating it to Uncle Ray's widow. Would you like to sign the card?'

How'd you like to kiss my rosy ass?'

"Good bye, Poteet. I'd have security show you out, but under the circumstances . . ." He spread his pudgy pink hands.

"You ain't heard the last of me."

"I hope you're wrong. You're not exactly a nightingale."

Stamping out, Ralph came face to face with Miss Luger's collarbone.

"You left the ladder out," she said.

"Why don't I go get it and climb up and punch you in the throat?"

She hoisted him one handed by his collar. She had sauerkraut on her breath. "You need a wife."

"I'm married," he lied. His larynx was almost shut.

"I wasn't proposing. You aren't my type." She lowered him to the floor. "In an unrelated matter, have you heard if Miss Hardy has plans for this evening?"

"Why ask me?" He pried his collar button out of his neck.

"I saw you talking with her in Santa's Castle."

"I ain't your Cupid. You better ask Mr. Healy."

"Why?"

"I don't want to be uncouth. Let's just say I saw Heather and Healy tearing one off in the stockroom ten minutes ago."

Her face turned the color of heated steel. "Excuse me." She turned away and broke into a stride.

"That's okay," Ralph said. "I didn't even hear you fart."

On his way out, he passed Mr. Klompen's customer carrying his new shoes in a tote bag. Ralph pointed at them. "If those don't work out, we got a style in back you might like, size sixteen triple-E. We call it the Sasquatch."

"Are you saying I have big feet?"

"Charles Barkley has big feet. You better get those gunboats back under the Statue of Liberty before she falls on her ass."

The bag with the Hush Puppies in it didn't have the impact

of the dumbbells in Santa's Castle. Ralph wobbled out onto the sidewalk without losing consciousness. He was a block away when he realized he was still wearing the coveralls. That was okay. He could wear them when he was stripping his car for hockable, nonessential parts. But he remembered he'd left his hat in Mr. Wax's office when he'd put on the Santa suit.

It was a plaid Tyrolean with a green feather in the band that he'd had since the year he dropped out of high school. When the man in the carnival booth had refused to give it to him because Ralph had used his own ball to knock over the milk bottles, Ralph had hit him with one of the bottles, grabbed the hat, and run. It was his lucky hat.

Back in the store he opened the door to the little room without knocking. Mr. Wax wasn't in sight. Ralph scooped his hat off a filing cabinet and started to leave, then went back to see if he could swipe a postage meter or something. That was when he saw Mr. Wax sprawled on the floor behind the desk. He looked like a waterfowl floating belly-up in a polluted pond.

Ralph bent down to feel Mr. Wax's wrist for a pulse. Nothing was going on there. He wondered if Goerings was going to declare a Heart Failure Sale day. He plucked out the manager's watch and tugged at the gold chain, but it was hung up. He moved in closer to untangle it. His foot nudged something. It was a .32 revolver with pearl grips.

The doorknob turned. In the instinct of self preservation, Ralph snatched up the revolver.

Heather Hardy came in, fastening a button on her Santa's elf costume. She had on a pointed hat, tights and a short skirt, and curly-toed slippers with bells on the toes. The camera she used to take pictures of children with Santa hung from a strap around her neck.

"Mr. Wax, should I tell them I'm filling in for Santa, or—" She saw the gun in Ralph's hand.

Ralph said. "Hey, I know this looks bad."

She looked from the revolver to Mr. Wax's right leg sticking out from behind the desk.

"You're going to laugh," Ralph said. He took a step toward her.

She raised the camera and tripped the shutter. The flash blinded Ralph. When he could see again, she was gone, but he heard her screaming and bells tinkling as she ran. Making Heather Hardy scream seemed to be a talent he and Austin Healy had in common.

The homicide detective was a large black man with a shaved head, whose hands shook with excitement when he held up the Polaroid photograph. It showed a dumpy middle-aged man in a plaid hat and blue coveralls standing over a body and holding a .32 revolver.

"Seventeen years with the department," the detective said. "I never saw evidence like this. I *heard* of it happening, but the detective involved was always someone who got promoted out of reach."

"You keep saying that," Ralph said.

"I'm going to have it blown up and framed and then I'm going to hang it over the fireplace in my fishing cabin. That fifteen-foot marlin's been there long enough."

"Can I call my lawyer now?"

"Call as many as you want. This picture's worth a thousand lawyers." He shoved his telephone across his desk. Ralph picked up the receiver and dialed.

"Purple Snatch. You pony up the cover, we uncover the ponies." The woman on the other end cracked her gum.

"Myra, this is Ralph Poteet. I got trouble."

"That's redundant," Myra said.

"Put on Floyd Swindlehurst."

"He ain't here."

Horseshit. Look under a stripper.

"Red Lucy ruptured a disk doing a lap dance and he went with her in the ambulance. He says he's gonna sue the customer on her behalf for reckless endangerment."

"Well, when he comes back, tell him to get down to police headquarters. Office of—" He looked at the detective.

"The name's Gerard."

"Horseshit."

Gerard shrugged. He was still looking at the Polaroid.

"Office of Lieutenant Gerard," Ralph said.

"Horseshit," Myra said.

"Actually it's sergeant. They won't promote me on account of the TV show. I thought people might forget. Then they made a movie. Then another TV show. I'm going to retire a sergeant."

Ralph said, "You ought to file a protest."

"Good idea. I'll take it up with Lieutenant Crunch."

Ralph cradled the receiver. "I didn't kill Mr. Wax."

"He fired you. You were overheard saying he hadn't heard the last of you. You were the last person to see him alive. Then there's this picture." He shook his head. "Seventeen years."

"If anybody overheard me, it was Miss Luger. She was on her way into Wax's office when I came out."

"She didn't go in. Left to take care of personal business."

That made him think of Heather Hardy and Austin Healy. "What about the floorwalker? I seen him screwing an elf and smuggling something out the alley door."

"I tucked a leprechaun once. Next day I sent her flowers and a box of Lucky Charms."

"She's a saleslgirl named Hardy. She took that picture. Healy's the thief I was hired to catch. Maybe Wax found out about one thing or the other or both and threatened to fire him."

"Did you take any pictures?"

"Will you forget the fucking picture for one minute? Grill Healy. The salesgirl, too."

"The girl's under sedation for hysteria. I wondered about the outfit, thought maybe it was Casual Friday. No one's seen Healy since before Wax got whacked. He's not at home."

"What's that tell you?"

"Not as much as this." Gerard tapped the Polaroid.

The telephone rang. The sergeant picked it up, listened. His face contorted. "Run them again. You did? You better be sure. Hell." He banged down the receiver. "Get out."

"What?"

"Leave. Blow. Take that stupid hat out of my office and make sure you're under it. Forensics says the carbon test they ran on your hands and those coveralls came up negative. You haven't discharged a firearm recently. The .32 hasn't been fired since the last time it was cleaned. Wax wasn't even shot. He was stabbed and whoever did it took the weapon with him. It wasn't found on the scene or on you."

Ralph stood, inflating himself. He tipped his hat forward like Frank Sinatra. "This mean the marlin gets to stay over the fireplace?"

"Don't provoke me. You're still my chief suspect."

Ralph adjusted his hat and hurried out.

Ralph shared an apartment with Erik/Erika the Red, the Helsinki Hermaphrodite, or so he/she was registered with the professional wrestling league in Mexico City. In reality, Erik/Erika was named Sherman Blindt, and his free weights, jump rope, and treadmill took up most of the space not occupied by his collection of orange wigs and tentacles of panty hose dripping perpetually from the shower rail. The rest was reserved for Ralph and his wardrobe: one Tyrolean hat, two Eterna prest sport coats, three

pairs of pants, four shirts, and five pairs of boxer shorts with the days of the week written on them in black Magic Marker. Ralph liked to check to see what day it was.

It was a good arrangement. Sherman was on tour most of the time and Ralph had the place to himself. He popped open his last can of Albanian beer and sat down to watch a bunch of losers in grass skirts snotting one another on a cheesy tropical island on TV. His mood was worse than the show.

The job at Goerings Department Store had been his first in weeks. No-fault divorce was killing his specialty. He missed schlepping his Instamatic around joints with names like Motel 69 and Orgasmagoria, snapping candids of husbands and wives doing the Serta Samba with their next-door neighbors. Undercover security was all he had now, and he'd blown that. Just when Austin Healy looked so promising.

He choked, coughed. Beer gushed out his nostrils. He had an epiphany.

Blowing his nose on his shirttail, Ralph wondered if his instincts were deserting him. Austin Healy wore eight-hundred-dollar suits. Austin Healy drove a new BMW. Austin Healy wore a wedding ring. He'd made enough money stealing from Goerings to give some of it to Ralph for keeping Heather Hardy a secret from Mrs. Healy. All Ralph had to do was find Healy and strike a deal before Heather woke up and told the cops and before Mrs. Healy read about it in the bulldog edition. He put on his hat and went downtown.

The alley between the store and Dyreday's Funeral Home opened off the back door of Goerings stockroom. Ralph spotted the BMW where Healy had parked it and slid in next to it, admiring the reflection of the new red Riviera in the glass bricks of the department store. He'd promised to sell the car for a former client currently doing time in prison for cable theft, but he hadn't gotten around to placing an ad. He cut the engine and made

himself comfortable. He knew Healy would return for his wheels sometime. Ralph was a Detroit boy.

He turned on the radio for company, but it was his bad luck that WMSG had programmed fifteen straight minutes of Shania Twain between commercials. He dropped off at thirty-two bars into "I Feel Like a Woman" and didn't wake up until the station blasted a spot for Warp Speed laxatives. The BMW was pulling out of its space.

Ralph thought the Riviera's battery was dead until he realized he'd left the transmission in drive. He put it in park, started the engine, and swung out behind Healy's car just as it entered traffic.

He gnawed off most of his nails on the way through the northern suburbs and out into the country, his bladder was full and he noticed he had only a quarter tank of gas. For all he knew Healy had topped off his tank and was headed for Canada. It made sense. If he hadn't killed Wax, the murder investigation had at least spooked him. His thefts would have to come out, his diddling Heather too, and if Mrs. Healy was anything like all the Mrs. Healys Ralph had known, the A Plan involved a suitcase full of cash and passage to a country that had no extradition treaty with the U.S. The trick was to separate him from the suitcase before Ralph ran dry or peed his pants.

Forty minutes and 160 potholes later, the BMW swung into the parking lot of a pole barn with a neon coffeepot on the roof and pumps in front. The sign read GUNS, GAS, GUTS, AND GUZZLE—COOK WANTED. The driver got out and went inside. Ralph parked in a slot between two tractor-trailer rigs and scampered to a bush near Healy's car. While he was standing there, he wondered about the box in the trunk. The way the car lay on its springs suggested sixty pounds of stereo components at least. Ralph shook himself off, zipped up, and went back to the Riviera for his wrecking bar.

The trunk latch gave up the ghost with a *pop*. The lid sprang up and Ralph leaned over to draw the tarp off the bundle inside. The trunk light reflected white off Austin Healy's dead face.

Ralph backed away, collided with someone standing behind him. Instantly a powerful forearm closed across his throat and something sharp prodded his right kidney.

"My compliments to your prostate," whispered a voice in his ear. "I almost froze to death waiting for you to finish behind that bush."

Ralph remembered he was still holding the wrecking bar. He swung it down, aiming for the nearest shin. It happened to be his own. He croaked and dropped the bar, clanging to the asphalt.

"I'm glad you brought the crowbar, Poteet. I can claim self defense. It's as good as that gun I found in Wax's desk. Not as good as you barging in and getting your picture taken, but we can't have everything, hmm?"

Ralph forgot the throbbing. He smelled sauerkraut. Suddenly everything made sense. Well, not everything.

Through his tears, he saw a man in a knee length topcoat approaching from the restaurant. He realized it was the man who'd been driving the BMW, and whom he'd mistaken for Healy.

"Hot in there," said the man, peeling off his knitted cap to expose his sweating bald head. "Got him good?"

"Mr. Klompen." The knife pressed Ralph's kidney. Things had stopped making sense.

"I got him," said the owner of the knife.

"Get him out of the open," commanded the shoe clerk.

Ralph was dragged backward and around one of the big rigs. In a pool of green light shed by the neon sign above, the person with the knife slammed Ralph up against the trailer and placed the point of the blade against the fatty flesh under Ralph's chin. The light made blank green cutouts of the assailant's spectacles.

"Miss Luger!" He felt vindicated. Also scared shitless.

The blade moved slightly. A trickle went down Ralph's neck. Another trickle went down his leg. "Shush, *Liebchen*," whispered the woman. She'd had to bend nearly double to bring her face close to his. She'd washed the kraut down with beer.

Klompen said, "I have to hand it to you, Poteet. Everyone knew you were a dick, but we underestimated you. You've got that fumblefuck act down cold. Truth is, you're too smart to live."

"But I *am* a fumblefuck!"

"*Leise, Kindlein*." Miss Luger held a finger to her lips.

"You can't be smart about everything. You never looked back to see if anyone was following you following me. After she retired from Olympics competition, Miss Luger worked for the East German Secret Police. She probably still would be if the Wall hadn't come down."

"That *Schweinehund* Reagan," Miss Luger said.

"What I can't figure out is how you knew I killed Wax. Thirty years I worked in that store, pryng whales into shoes designed for minnows. I never complained."

"You got good muscle tone." Ralph tried to sound endearing.

"When they promoted that imbecile over me, you know what I did? I gave him a rubber tree for his office."

"I saw it. It's a beaut."

He was too dumb to realize Austin Healy was stealing the store blind. The cops won't know how stupid he was, though. That's my last gift to him. We'll bury his body where they won't find it and leave his car at the train station here. They'll think he killed Wax when he found out about the thefts, and flew the coop."

"Good plan. You got a hell of a head on your shoulders."

"I cut off his testicles," Miss Luger said.

Ralph's sphincter let go.

"He's dead," said Mr. Klompen. "He won't feel it."

Ralph exhaled with relief.

Mr Klompen sniffed 'Really, Miss Luger, I wish you'd adopt an American diet."

"I cut them off, anyway,' she said 'He stuck his *Schwanstucker* in my Heather.'

Having a schoolgirl crush on her doesn't make her your Heather Anyway, his heart wasn't in it, even if his *Schwanstucker* was She suspected him and he seduced her to keep her from running to Wax But thank you for helping me clean up Unfortunately, Poteet, we have to make it look like you were following Healy and blundered into an ambush When they find your body the world will think you were stupid enough to suspect him of killing Wax."

"But I *am* stupid enough!"

'I'm really sorry There's nothing worse than failure to be recognized for one's abilities."

"I'm an idiot Ralph wailed. "Ask anybody I can give you references."

No use prolonging this Miss Luger, the knife please

And then the parking lot was filled with light White floodlamps washed out Miss Luger's bony features, red and blue and yellow lights spanked off Mr Klompen's naked scalp Sirens shredded Ralph's eardrums.

Drop the knife' The commanding voice was distorted by the amplification of a bullhorn.

The knife tinkled to the pavement Miss Luger said, *Ver dammt'* Her hands went above her head

A tidal wave of blue uniforms swept between Ralph and his captors Handcuffs ratcheted Rights were read A pair of officers appeared on either side of Miss Luger but she remained still and didn't struggle Mr Klompen resisted, and a half dozen officers lifted him to his feet and carried him toward the nearest squad car

"Espadrilles!" bellowed Mr Klompen. 'Wing tips' Penny

loafers Wellingtons! Can I show you something in a nice moc casin? Hahahahahahahahahahahahahaha !!!"

"Men" Miss Luger's expression was stony "Is it any wonder?"

Sergeant Gerard strode into the light A fur hat covered his shaved head and he was carrying a bullhorn "Throat cut Po teet?"

Ralph completed his examination "It's okay I'm gonna need a new pair of boxers for Wednesdays"

"Thanks for the tip. I was going to offer you a lift in a squad car."

"How'd you find me?"

"We staked out the BMW Heather Hardy woke up and told us about Austin Healy We popped his trunk while Klompen and Luger were answering questions We figured Healy was killed right after Wax."

"You tailed us? We must've looked like a Christmas parade"

"Yeah Too bad you left the Santa suit behind"

"Any reward?"

Gerard glared "We just saved your hide"

"I'm still out of work."

"Try Goerings Department Store I understand there are some openings."

Ralph walked away bowlegged

It took him a while to find his hat It had come off when Miss Luger had grabbed him and an indeterminate number of squad cars had run over it He brushed off some of the tread marks and popped it on his head A lucky hat was a lucky hat

BANK JOB

Thomas S. Roche

I almost pulled my piece when I saw the big guy in black come around the long counter to the tellers window, and it wasn't just because I thought he was cutting. My reflexes were just a moment too slow—and thank God, or I would have been painted all over an ad for a fixed-rate mortgage. I felt the shotgun barrel at the base of my skull and heard the guy. "Don't move, motherfucker. Don't even fuckin' breathe."

"Take it easy, pal," I said, my voice even and smooth, as the guy's accomplice pointed a Glock at the teller and screamed at her. "Just take it easy. I'm not gonna try anything."

He hit me with the butt of his Remington. I felt the pain explode into the back of my head, hit the ground gasping.

"I'll tell you who's gonna try anything, motherfucker. Now just shut the fuck up!"

He had an accent. Latino, maybe? Vatos weren't going much for bank robbery in the Mission lately—hadn't had a Latino perp on a bank job since 1998—but maybe it was a new gang. I was going to have fucking FBI goons all over my ass when I got back to work on Monday. I tasted blood. I lay there on the ground and said a Hail Mary. I thought about the Kel-Tec nine-millimeter in my belt clip and about how if I reached for it I'd never come close before the guy pulped my brains with that Remington.

Standard street thug protocol, if you can call it that. Scare the shit out of the buffest guy in the place, and no one else will

fuck with you. The gym was my way of dealing with the bullshit of being a cop, and I guess my muscles made me the vato's target.

"Stay frosty," I said, and the guy with the Remington kicked me in the balls.

I heard the padded thud of running shoes on the red bank carpet.

"Nobody fuckin' moves and we don't gotta shoot nobody," shouted the fat guy. Something was wrong with his accent. He was losing it. A fake?

I heard sirens, heard the skinny guy cursing, a steady stream of expletives in English. I felt the fat guy grabbing the back of my belt and yanking me to my feet. I thought, What kind of a vato curses in English, anyway?

He stuck the Glock in my face. "All right, motherfucker, we need a hostage, and you're it."

I heard the fat guy growl "Walk" in my ear, felt the muzzle of the Remington in my back. I walked in front of them, out into the oncoming sirens, praying nobody started shooting.

Outside on 16th Street I smelled the reek of piss and beer. Homeless people were sprawled in doorways. I slipped in a pile of shit and went down on one knee. Fat Boy grabbed my collar and yanked me to my feet again. The sirens were deafening now, as the ambulance went racing down Mission. I cursed. There was a steel-blue 1990 Plymouth waiting on the street, and as the trunk popped, Fat Boy kicked me in the ass and tumbled me in so hard I hit my head on the jack and saw stars. A huge duffel bag landed in my stomach and Fat Boy said, "Here, you keep track of this, motherfucker." The trunk slammed down and in one second flat we were moving so fast I hit my head on the jack again, and it all went away.

I came to with a familiar smell in my nostrils. It wasn't the rancid, musty smell of a car trunk or the sharp tang of two hundred grand, which was what Skinny Boy kept saying over and over again. "Two hundred grand and a fuckin' cop. Two hundred thousand bucks and our hostage is a fuckin cop, Babs." I looked up through blurred eyes and saw the guy holding my wallet and badge, the Kel-Tec nine-millimeter stuck into the front of his belt alongside the Glock. I was tied to a wooden chair with what felt like clothesline. I had been stripped down to my underwear.

"I fuckin' hate cops," Fat Boy said, laughing off to the side somewhere. His voice was way too high.

Any visions I was having of *Reservoir Dogs* disappeared from my head as I tried to place what was wrong with that fucking voice. No Latino accent, sure—more like New York, maybe Long Island or some fucking thing. But what the fuck was wrong with it? He sounded like a fucking Polk Street tranny—

Christ. Jesus Christ. Jesus fucking Christ.

Laughing his ass off, Skinny Boy grabbed his ski mask and pulled it slowly off, long blond hair spilling out of it. I breathed deep and smelled a woman's body, so unfamiliar I almost didn't remember it.

Her face was pale, gone red with the heat of the mask. She was thin, all right, with a long, slender neck and a pointed jaw. Not much of a body on her, which was why she could pass for a skinny guy, but she was all muscle. She had long, even, white teeth. Goddamn pretty, too. Big blue eyes and full red lips. Late twenties probably, maybe a little older. Jesus, if I met this girl in a bar, I would fall all over myself trying to pick her up. I'd make a fucking fool out of myself. I hadn't slept with a woman since the divorce, even though the department shrink, Berringer, kept telling me, in shrinkspeak, that maybe I should go out and get a little. There had been offers, that lady agent Marquez from

All Erica from the typing pool, twenty-two years old and hot for me like there was no tomorrow—but I always turned them down.

'A fuckin' cop,' said Skinny Boy. 'Robert Paul Santini. Italian?"

"Sicilian," I said softly.

'Same fuckin' dif,' said Skinny Boy, and Fat Boy shouted, "Hey, watch it, bitch!"

I always did like Italian sausage, especially when it's pork sausage. You ain't bad looking either, if you go for that Italian look.' Fat Boy shot her a dirty look. 'Jesus, Bobby Boy, if we hadn't given your fucking flatfoots the slip, I'd be worried we might get in trouble. Kidnapped cops bring a hell of a lot of heat, or at least that's the conventional wisdom. But the way I figure it, you ain't parked in the bank lot, are you?"

I just stared at her, face frozen, and she had her answer. Everybody knows the Wells Fargo lot on 16th Street has a free parking place once in a fucking blue moon. I had parked almost six blocks away.

Fat Boy—the skinny chick had called her Babs—took off her mask, too. Her long black hair came flowing out. She looked Italian maybe—her Latino accent had been a bad fake, and if I hadn't had a shotgun on me, I like to think I would have caught it right off. Babs wasn't the looker her partner was, but she would have turned my head in any other situation. She had thick lips and big, dopey olive-colored eyes, and her flesh had the texture of vellum.

Skinny Boy stripped as she talked, reaching down to the hem of her sweatshirt and lifting it over her head, showing me her bare, muscled belly and six-pack abs, the tightly wound Ace bandage holding her breasts flat to her body. She stripped casually, like it didn't matter one fucking bit that I could see her, because I was already dead. She kicked off her running shoes and dropped her black sweatpants and stepped out of them, standing

in front of me in her black cotton panties like she hadn't a care in the world. "And you were in the back of the line, Bobby. That means you weren't there long. Most of the 180 seconds we were in that bank, you had your face in the ground. I'm betting there ain't a person in that bank that could place you. You tell anyone you were going to the bank?"

I hadn't. I closed my eyes as my mind raced. I was fucked. I had never been even close to this fucked, not even the time the four Salvages had me and Bricker cornered in the alley my first week on patrol a dozen years ago.

Babs was undressing. She peeled off the sweatshirt, and two pillows—one front, one back—fell to either side of her. She had a sports bra on underneath—had to, I didn't doubt, with tits that size. It was soaked with sweat and half transparent. She stripped off her sweatpants, pulling and prodding as molded foam rubber fell out of the hollows of her back, her ass, her hips, her thighs. She was muscled like Skinny Boy, but had a hell of a lot more curves. Her hips were full, a slender waist curving in tight to a flat, muscled belly and then out again to these big fuckin' tits. Goddamn, she was built. Hairy armpits and a little trail of dark fur leading down her belly—she was Mediterranean, all right, her body hair a coarse, lustrous black. But she shaved her legs. And she wasn't wearing a damn thing under those sweatpants. Babs saw me staring and looked back at me, chuckling.

"Maybe Bobby Boy doesn't mind being kidnapped by two beautiful bank robbers," she said, her eyes lingering on my lap.

"Don't bet on it," I said.

"Clinging to false virtue will get you nowhere," sneered Babs.

I laughed. "You read that in a fortune cookie?"

Skinny Boy looked down at my cock and smiled. "Don't worry, Bobby, we'll put that pork sausage to good use. We'll eat it right up."

Skinny Boy popped the safety pin holding her Ace bandage on, started unwinding it.

"Hold this, will you?" She tried to put the end of the bandage in my teeth. I kept my mouth closed, and she smacked me hard and pried my teeth apart. She stuck the end of the bandage in there and started pirouetting like a ballerina in front of me.

I watched, unable to take my eyes away as she turned around, stripping away the six or eight layers of bandage it had taken to hide those tits. As the bandage came away I saw why that was — the girl was stacked. She had full breasts with big pink nipples.

She looked at me looking at her and smiled.

Babs walked over and stood in front of me, naked. Skinny Boy turned to her. Babs put her arm around Skinny Boy's back and kissed her full on the lips. Babs pushed Skinny Boy back and onto the filthy bare mattress in the middle of the room, right in front of my chair. They stretched on the mattress and started making out, Babs on top, as I watched, transfixed, letting my eyes flicker around the room to see what my chances were. No, I didn't give a fuck about *those* chances — whatever these crazy bitches were going to do to me, they were going to do, and if they wanted to give me a show that would have cost me a hundred dollars at the Mitchell Brothers Theater, that was their fucking choice. No, what I was interested in was my chance of escaping, because I had it in my head that these dykes were going to kill me, and after twelve years as a cop working every angle from street bull, to federal law enforcement liaison, I know enough to trust my instincts.

Babs's hands rested casually on Skinny Boy's breasts as the two of them stretched, nude and half nude, respectively, on the filthy mattress. Looking at me, they both smiled.

"Isn't this supposed to be the teenage white boy's jerk-off fantasy?" said Skinny Boy. "Two gorgeous women kidnap a guy and put on a nice girl-girl show for him, then fuck him silly."

"Is that what we're gonna do?" asked Babs.

"Decide for yourself," said Skinny Boy, hefting my Kel-Tec and pointing it at me with a smile. "I'm fucking horny. But I think in that teenage fantasy, Bobby Boy, the bank robbers don't usually end the fuck by blowing the lucky boy's brains out, like we will."

My ears popped, my heart pounded. I could hardly breathe.

"Don't worry, though, Bobby, we'll let you come first. Maybe twice, if you're real good. You think you can come twice, once for each of us, before we snuff you?"

I couldn't see much, but we were in the living room and the place looked no bigger than a one-bedroom. The chair I was tied to and a bare twin mattress in the corner were the only furnishings, and there was about an inch and a half of dust and the scattered bodies of cockroaches and moths across the floor. The windows were boarded over and there was a languid serpent of discarded police tape near the front door. The door itself had splinters kicked out of it near the lock, probably where the landlord put the padlock. I could smell the sharp salt tang of the ocean.

They had taken my watch, my shoes, my wallet, badge, gun, the gravity knife in my pocket, taken everything.

I ran my thumb along my ring finger and felt my class ring, U.C. Berkeley, class of 1986. The setting had cracked a couple of days ago, exposing the jagged edge. Soft, but sharp. I had already scratched myself three times on it. A smarter man would have taken the damn thing off and put it in his underwear drawer. I thanked God I was stupid.

I started to work the ring off my finger.

"I think we should let him come three times," Babs was saying. "If he can get it up that many times, that is. And when he comes the third time, after we've both had him once, that's when we shove the gun in his mouth."

"That's a great idea, Babs," said Skinny Boy. "Would you like it that way, Bobby? Would you like your last moment alive to be spent with a gorgeous woman stuck on your dick, just as the back of your head blows off, Bobby?"

I looked at them, my eyes cold.

"Robert," I said.

"What?"

"Robert," I told her. "I'm not Bobby, I'm Robert. Everyone calls me Robert."

Skinny Boy started laughing. Babs, too, where she was sprawled naked on the mattress. They laughed their asses off.

"All right," said Skinny Boy. "Robert, then. I guess we should be on a first name basis if we're going to fuck you, especially if we're going to blow your brains out afterwards. My name's Carlene, and that's Carlene Patricia Oswald, DOB December 15, 1970, place of birth Montauk, Long Island, Social Security number 545-68-2122, just in case you had any doubt we were going to kill you, pig. You can call me Carly while we're fucking. That there is Barbara Jane Milano, DOB June 10, 1974—"

"No, 1975," said Babs.

"—call her Babs. I don't know her Social Security number, but it shouldn't really matter that much, since whatever you know is going to be on that wall in about an hour when we leave for the airport. And in case you're thinking your pig friends are going to rescue you, remember that they're looking for a pair of Hispanic males. You may as well say your prayers now. I'm going to go take a shower, get myself all clean and pretty for you. Babs, get him warmed up for me."

Carly Oswald disappeared through a doorway, and Babs got up off the mattress. She walked over to the pile of her clothes and produced a silver switchblade. I braced myself, figuring she was going to pull a fucking *Blue Velvet* on me just for laughs.

"You got a hard on yet *Robert*?" she asked turning my first name into a mocking singsong "Are you rock hard for your two new girlfriends, Robert?"

"Nah," I said. "I'm not *that* easy."

She came over and sat in my lap "Oh, you're that easy" she said, wrapping her hand around my cock through the damp cotton of my jockey shorts Behind me, I heard the shower go on The switch flashed open and Babs began to trace the blade over my throat I breathed slow and steady, tried not to move She forced my lips open with her thumb and slipped the blade into my mouth I tasted the tang of metal and I would have sworn I tasted blood She pumped the knife in a few times, and I grunted as she cut my tongue She took the switchblade out and grabbed my undershirt yanking it up and slicing the knife into the thin, sweat-damp cotton.

By then I was working the edge of the ring under one of the knots and pulling, rhythmically, working the metal back and forth I was good with knots but this one was a bitch

'Don't worry, I'm probably not going to slit your throat,' Babs said casually as she methodically sliced away my undershirt I think it'd be more fun to watch your brains explode I haven't fucked a guy I knew I was going to kill since I was—shit, nineteen or so."

She tossed my ruined undershirt over her shoulder stood up and went to work on my jockey shorts, the tip of the knife grazing my cock and balls as she cut 'Still not hard, eh?' She sat back down in my lap, rubbed her breasts over my face "You can suck them," she said softly "Come on Robert have some fun Are you going to have yourself one last fling with a beautiful girl, or are you going to make me rape you?'

I opened my mouth and she guided one hard nipple between my lips I suckled while she reached down and took hold of my cock, stroking it.

"Mmmm, nice. We're getting some action here. You're taking too long, though," she said, and slipped out of my lap and onto her knees. I felt her full, thick lips wrap around my soft cock, felt her tongue go to work on me.

"Oh fuck," I moaned. "Oh fuck—"

Then I was hard, and Babs was pumping my cock into her mouth. She got up and sat herself in my lap again, facing me.

Her voice rough, thick, breathy. "I'm going to enjoy this a lot, if it's any consolation," she said, guiding the head of my prick between her lips and grinding her hips, not letting me inside her just yet. "Promise me you'll at least try to come?"

"Fuck you," I said.

"Is that any way to talk to your favorite girlfriend? Come on, I'm not on the pill, you're the first guy I've fucked in three years. Maybe you'll get me pregnant and have a legacy. You got any kids, Robert? No?"

I glared at her.

"Good, then I can have your firstborn child nine months after I kill you. God, that's hot. Maybe it'll be a son. Don't worry, I'll make sure he's a bank robber, baby, rather than a fucking pig."

She moaned as she sank down on my hard cock, and I caught my breath as her flesh enveloped me. She was incredibly wet.

"You're not that badly hung for a cop," she said, her voice hoarse. "This even feels pretty good." She put the switchblade against my throat. "Don't you dare come before I do, though, or I'll slit your fucking throat and you'll spoil all the fun. Goddammit, your cock feels good in me. I wonder why I stopped fucking guys in the first place. Oh yeah, now I remember. They're all fucking shits. Man, that feels good."

And it felt good to me. Fuck it, I thought, she's got me hard now, guys get hard all the time when they're scared. There is nothing wrong with me feeling pleasure here, gorgeous woman

banging me. Jesus, did it really always feel like this? I couldn't even remember what it was like to be inside a woman. It felt incredible. Babs began to pump her hips, rubbing her breasts against my face as she fucked me. I could tell by the rhythm that she was close to coming already. She grabbed my hair and pulled my head back, placing the switchblade at my throat as she fucked me. "Don't come, don't come, don't come—" she panted as her body ground against mine, and then I felt the telltale clench of her muscles. She threw back her head and screamed at the top of her lungs.

Damn. I forgot how good that feels. Jesus, Robert, you've got a nice cock. Don't come yet, you bastard, I'm going to do it a second time. Don't come or I'll kill you right now, and that'll totally piss Carly off."

And I closed my eyes, trying to fight off my approaching orgasm as she twisted and pumped on top of me, stroking the knife against my carotid artery as she mounted toward her second orgasm. Then she was screaming again, and she grabbed me and pushed her face against mine, kissing me. And despite myself, I was kissing her back, hard, our tongues intertwining as she rubbed her tits against my chest.

"Come for me," she said. "Give me a gangster son."

It didn't take much. I was already fighting it off. Goddammit, it felt incredible. She laughed as I finished coming, and then she clicked the switchblade shut on the back of the chair and pulled herself off of me, a thin stream oozing onto my balls.

"I'm going to go stand on my head," she said, putting her hand down over her crotch to staunch the flow. "Ups my chances of getting pregnant. Fuck, I'd love to have a cop's kid. That has to be the kinkiest thing I've ever heard of. Carly," she shouted, "You finished with that shower yet? I've got him ready for you." She turned back to me. "You think you can get hard again, Robert?"

That question always caught me off guard. "Maybe in a little bit."

"Aw, how sweet. The motherfucker needs some romance to get hard." She bent down and kissed me again, her mouth and tongue hot against mine as she caressed my face. "Well, you better fucking make it sooner rather than later, because if you can't provide for Carly, she's likely to blow your brains out right away. Wait, on second thought, she always likes a little romance first. Don't know how she's going to get you to eat her with you tied in a chair like that. Ah, wait, I know."

Babs stepped back, picked up her foot, and kicked me hard in the chest. The wind went out of my lungs and I felt a sickening swirl in my stomach as I toppled over. I hit the ground screaming and the jagged edge of the ring tore into the heel of my palm. I fought down a scream. My hand getting slippery with blood, I went to work on the knot double time. I almost had it.

"You like to eat pussy, Robert?" Carly was standing over me nude and dripping. "Don't worry, I didn't wash my cunt. I left it nice and ripe for you."

Babs was in the shower. It was a hot day and Carly hadn't bothered to towel off.

"Sure," I said.

"You any good at it?"

"Never had any complaints."

With a sneer, Carly positioned her naked body above me, legs spread, and lowered herself down onto my face.

I was determined to be the best goddamn pussy licker in the world. I was going to make this bitch scream with pleasure because the longer I kept her on top of me, the longer I had to work on the clothesline binding me. And the more distracted I kept her with my fancy tonguework, the less she was going to pay at-

tention to what I was doing with my hands. I went to work on both ends.

Oh, that's good," she moaned. "That's not bad at all. Too bad we can't keep you around for Saturday nights in Mexico. Yeah, you know what you're doing."

My hands were slick with my blood. I yanked hard with the broken glass ring, sought after the end of the rope. I was close, close, close—I just had to keep Carly happy and on top of me.

"Yeah—keep doing that. Yeah—keep doing that. Keep doing that. Keep fuckin doing that—"

I heard the door. I didn't have time to even wonder if the cops had found me when Carly jumped off of me, whirled around as a middle-aged Asian man stood in the doorway. He spoke in a heavy accent. "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry—what are you doing here? I'm sorry to interrupt—"

Thank God for San Francisco landlords. I started thrashing back and forth, screaming at the top of my lungs. "Fucking help me, I've been kidnapped!" I managed to get out, and Carly hit me so hard I felt my front teeth give. I screamed in pain as the Asian man stared, wide-eyed, backing off. Babs came running, naked, out of the shower holding a Glock in her wet hand. "Fuck me," she shouted as the Asian man turned and ran.

"I'll get him!" Babs shouted, running for the door, still nude. "You take care of the pig!"

Then she disappeared through the door, not even caring that she was naked as she ran after the landlord. Carly picked up my Kel-Tec and thumbed off the safety. She came over and knelt over me, one knee in my chest.

"I always did hate long-term relationships," she growled as she chambered a round.

I grabbed her wrist, yanking it out straight as my other hand came free. I brought the heel of my hand up hard into her elbow. It snapped with a *crack* and she screamed at the top of her lungs.

I'll give her this, though—the bitch didn't let go of the pistol. Her ruined arm shaking in traumatic spasms she managed to grab the gun with her other hand as I grabbed for her wrist and missed.

"Was it good for you, motherfucker?" she growled sticking the pistol into my belly and pulling the trigger. I didn't feel a thing, even as a geyser of blood exploded over Carly's nude body. Without thinking I got hold of her wrist and managed to yank it away as the pistol went off again, close to my face powder burn all over me as I pulled and twisted her wrist. She tried to get at my throat with her other arm but she couldn't move it. I saw the pain filling her eyes as I got my free hand around her throat and squeezed as hard as I fucking could not around but *into*.

She tried to scream, couldn't. I squeezed harder, felt her windpipe giving way. She pulled the trigger on the Kel Tec once, twice, three times, and I heard gunfire outside—lots of it, maybe fifteen or sixteen rounds from Babs's Glock. I kept squeezing until I heard the pistol hit the ground, and then I kept holding on to her throat with one hand while I felt around for the pistol with the other. Her eyes were wide, bloodshot, dead, and as a spasm went through her naked body a fine spray of blood blew out of her mouth and onto my face into my eyes. Carly still lay nude atop me, as if she really was giving me one last fuck and the agony started to hit me in my stomach, pain like I'd never felt. I fought down a scream.

"I got him," shouted Babs as she appeared in the doorway, her naked body covered in blood and gore. "He almost got to his car, but I fucking got him. Jesus fucking Christ, Carly, get your clothes on—you can't fuck the pig *now*, we've got to get to the airport!"

I shoved Carly's lifeless body off of me and reached for the Kel Tec. Babs's eyes went wide, but she figured it out quick. I

couldn't get the gun up in time—she pointed the Glock at my face and pulled the trigger.

She went pale as there was a hollow click. She dropped the gun and put her hands up.

My eyes flickered down to the hole in my belly, surging and seething with black blood. I felt my stomach seizing up and I tasted more blood, a lot of it.

"I surrender, Officer," she said, her voice shaking as she cocked one hip at me. "I'm all yours."

And she was.

I pulled the trigger of the Kel-Tec four times, and Babs dropped to her knees and then fell back bloody. I closed my eyes and heard the Kel-Tec hit the ground as a spray of Babs's blood misted over me like warm rain. I closed my eyes and whispered the first part of a Hail Mary, just for the hell of it, as everything went black.

THE WINDSOR BALLET

A MARY SHELLEY MYSTERY

Deborah Morgan

Will you respect me in the morning? is not the question on my mind. I've been there. What? Twenty-five, thirty years ago as a fresh young teenager, dating jocks and asking that cliché while they groped their way past white cotton panties and bras with pink bows.

Now, I'm having a hell of a time stopping this one. Correction. I'm having a hard time deciding whether I *want* to stop him.

He's ready, quick, something I attribute both to youth and to training. He works as a stripper in Windsor, Canada, across the river from Detroit. I figure he's good at it. He wears Stacy-Adams suits and looks like a prep, not a pimp, when he's decked out, and he drives a Jag that's paid for.

What am I concerned about? Ethics, for one thing. You see, there's a slim chance he's somehow involved in this case I'm working on. Or he knows someone who is. For another thing, there's our age difference. But what the hell? I'm single now, so I don't have to answer to anybody. Besides, it's flattering to have a guy show interest who's closer to my son's age than to my own.

Age. There's the rub. Oh, not in numbers, but in *body*. The subtle yet bona fide changes that are easily disguised under clothing. I'm middle-aged, for God's sake. Do I really want to get naked in front of this young, glistening, muscular body?

How in the hell did I get here?

How *did* I get here?

The drive to my downtown Detroit office from my place in River Rouge had taken twice as long as usual. Threatened by the mercury drop, the rain couldn't decide whether to go sleet or snow. It wouldn't have mattered. The commuters weren't slowing down, except to gawk at the occasional accident caused by one of their own. I doubted they were in a hurry to get to work. It was Monday, after all. But they were Detroiters down to their nuts. Cars were what made Detroit, and Detroit taught its inhabitants to *drive*.

The kid, five seven or five eight and weighing one forty dripping wet (which he was, parking being damn near nonexistent in front of my building), stepped gingerly through the open doorway to my offices at 10:38, exactly thirty-four minutes after I'd answered the phone that was ringing when I'd unlocked.

He studied the lettering on the door with a look of confusion that indicated he hadn't a clue what the "Prometheus" in Prometheus Investigations meant. A rolled sheet of paper was clasped firmly in his hands and he fidgeted with it while he looked around the reception room. That took all of four seconds.

The door to my office was open. I keep it that way since I don't yet have the money to hire a receptionist. I always did like to wear a lot of hats, which is a good thing when you're a private dick. Especially a female dick.

He looked as young as his voice had sounded over the phone a half hour ago. His dark brown eyes were rimmed red and as he peered into my office he put me in mind of a puppy who'd peed on the rug. "I'm Jason Summerfield?" He said it in the form of a question.

"Come in, Jason. I haven't bitten anyone for several months now."

"You're M. Shelley? I thought you'd be six feet ten with a smoking gun in each hand and—

"And what, Mr. Summerfield? Balls? Even Marlowe didn't stack up to those standards. Except for the balls, and mine are bigger than his."

"Who's Marlowe?"

"Not important."

"I just meant that I thought I was talking to the secretary when I called."

"You were. Have a seat."

He did.

I looked over the notes I'd made from our phone conversation. "You say your fiancee has been missing since Saturday night?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You called the police?"

"Yeah, several times. They wouldn't consider her missing till late last night, both here and over there."

"Over there?"

"Yeah, in Windsor."

"Windsor, Canada? Did she go missing in Canada?"

"Yes, ma'am." He tightened his grip around the scroll. "I told her not to go over there."

"Why? Windsor's pretty harmless, isn't it?"

"The girls she works with wanted to take her to the Windsor Ballet." His jaw clenched.

I wasn't sure why he seemed so upset, unless he was the type who expected the little woman to sit at home and knit socks. "So? They went to the ballet. Did she disappear from the—?" I wondered what to call it. Theater? Hall? Auditorium?

"I didn't want her to go. I mean, yeah, guys do that sort of thing. It's normal. But women?"

"I don't follow."

"You know The Windsor Ballet"

I gave him a blank look.

He nudged the sarcasm needle up a notch "What do you investigate, kids filching communion cups from the local church? Haven't you heard of the Review? Franks Place? Fantasy Island? They're male strip joints, Miss Shelley Females cover where they're going by calling it the Windsor Ballet"

He filled me in on the particulars Tawny Malone had donned her wedding veil and too-tight jeans and too-low cut red sweater and taken off in a van with her coworkers for a bachelorette party on foreign ground They'd ended up at Franks Place About two-thirds into the show, Tawny had left the table to go to the bathroom and never returned.

"She went to the bathroom alone?" I'm not of the female majority that goes to the powder room in pairs, but the operative word here is *majority*.

"No Karen went with her—Karen owns the office where Tawny works. Tawny told Karen she would wait in the hall But when Karen came out, she wasn't there Karen figured she'd gone back to the table but when she checked, the others hadn't seen her either."

I indicated the paper "That her photo, by any chance?"

He unfurled the large cylinder and handed it to me "This is our engagement picture It ran in the *Detroit News* a couple of months ago."

I flattened it and bolted it to the desk with a snow globe and a dish of leftover Christmas candy The shot was a black-and-white glossy eight by ten, an image of a fair-haired girl with gleaming teeth recently released from retainer prison and crystal eyes glistening in anticipation of wedded bliss Seated beside her was Jason Summerfield, looking proud and proprietary and ready to take responsibility for the girl's health and happiness till death they would part.

I studied the photo, tried to get a handle on whether she looked like the type to leave a guy at the altar. "What did the police say?"

"Said they get a couple of calls a month about women disappearing after going to the clubs. Said they usually turn up after a little party with one of the'— he paused —'employees.'"

I thought about that. If she'd gotten particularly friendly with one of the strippers, I was pretty sure her girlfriends wouldn't have told the groom-to-be. But wouldn't the bride have clued one of her coworkers in on her plans? "Have you checked with her family?"

"There's not any. She's an orphan. I think that's why she's been so excited about getting married. She wants a big, happy family—you know, white fence, two point four kids, an SUV. We've both been working our butts off, putting back money to buy a house. Miss Shelley, I know she wouldn't throw all that away for one night with another guy. She's—" He blushed, then continued. "She's, like, not into sex *that* much, you know? She gets more excited about having her own place to fix up—to come home to."

"Where does she work?"

"Millennium Insurance."

I jotted it down and asked him for the address. After he'd given it, I said, "Did they spring up when the calendar rolled, or just change the name?"

He grinned and I got a glimpse of the happy young man in the photo. "They were called Century before, but Karen decided that the new name and some high-tech redecorating would bring in more business."

"This Karen have a last name?"

"Peel. Like a banana."

I told him what my fee was. He stood and fished out his wallet and withdrew a stack of C-notes. "This is the money I had

put back for a honeymoon. He stared at it a moment before dropping it on my desk. "But it won't do me any good without a wife."

Millennium Insurance smelled of new vinyl and perfume and some sort of fiber treatment that stung my eyes. I assumed that was from the recently installed carpeting in a shade they were probably calling galaxy blue. It sure as hell wasn't from all the chrome and glass on top of it.

No amount of heat could take the chill off a place like this and the cool looks that came from the two women in windowed offices to my right didn't help. If they were lucky, the flying saucer-shaped fixtures hanging above their desks were heat lamps. Those two offices sandwiched a center cubicle that was as dark and empty as King Tut's tomb. It matched a larger black hole at the back.

A receptionist with long brown hair and hazel eyes behind brushed silver frames gave me a smile that was almost apologetic and asked if I was in the market for some coverage.

"Coverage?" I rubbed my arms. "A blanket would be nice."

"I meant insurance coverage." She added in a whisper, "I have thermals on under my pantsuit."

The suit was wool but even its shade gave me a chill: ice blue. I placed one of my cards on her desk. "Seen any good ballets lately?"

She hesitated. "You must be here about Tawny. Do you think she's really missing? Did Jason hire you? Is he holding up okay?"

I ignored the questions. "How many of you were there that night?"

"All of us." Speaking more quietly she added, "The owner expects everyone to participate when she throws a party."

"Which one is the owner?"

"I'll get her for you."

She picked up the phone and punched some numbers. After a moment a woman came through a door at the back and made her way toward us.

She had platinum-blond hair to her shoulders and was head-to-toe slender in a royal blue dress split to her left thigh that would've been more fitting for dinner at the Rattlesnake Club than in an office.

The receptionist handed her my card and I studied her quickly while she read over it. Her tan matched my own, except that hers was probably the result of some ocean paradise while mine was manufactured at a tanning parlor near my office. She was older than she'd first seemed, and had to be making some major bucks to support her nip-and-tuck habit. I was surprised she hadn't had her breasts done. Someone along the way must've convinced her that more than a mouthful was a waste.

A female private eye. How intriguing." She extended her hand. "I'm Karen Peel. You will want to talk to all of us." She turned to the receptionist. "Heather, would you tell the others that lunch is ready?" To me she said. "Everyone's beginning to get a little concerned about Tawny, so I thought it would be easier if I had lunch catered. Won't you join us?"

"I'll pass on the food, but a few minutes with the group before you eat would be appreciated."

"Of course." She locked the door, then flipped the sign to CLOSED and started toward the back room. I followed her.

Once inside, she introduced me to the two women from the cubicles. Lisa, a redhead with long acrylic nails done in a French manicure, was built like an hourglass with too much sand. The slim black girl was introduced as Diane. She was as tall as her boss but younger by about fifteen years.

After everyone was seated at the large round table, Karen spoke. "Jason hired you?"

"That's right. He seems to be more distraught than all of you combined."

"Well, until about two hours ago, we were sure that Tawny had decided to have a little fling before tying the knot. When she didn't show up, I called Jason and told him I would hire an investigator. Which I did, of course. But I suppose the young man needed to feel like he was doing something constructive."

I thought about asking whom she'd hired, but remembered that this was an insurance company. She'd have her personal favorites and I was sure I wouldn't get a straight answer. "Did any of you socialize with Tawny outside the office?"

"Not really," Karen said. "Heather and Diane both have children, so they're usually pretty busy with family things. And Lisa just started working here a few weeks ago."

I noted that Heather and Diane were both wearing wedding rings. "Must've taken some doing, convincing your husbands to watch the kids while you went to a male strip joint."

Heather blushed. "I— I didn't tell Roy where we were going. I just said it was a wedding shower."

"I told my man the same thing," Diane said. "He would have had a fit if he'd known what I was doing."

Karen laughed. "When they get to our age, Miss Shelley, they'll grow tired of answering to the *pants* in the family. Don't you agree?"

Boss or not, it was easy to see that she exercised as much control as possible. She'd be harder to crack than the others and was therefore the one with whom I needed to show an alliance. "Miss Peel is right, girls."

"Please, call me Karen."

"Karen. Aren't you concerned that Tawny has run into some sort of trouble?"

"As I said, I've hired an investigator. Really though, I think she's having some fun before taking the plunge. Everyone

here will tell you she was like the kid in the proverbial candy shop. When she and I went to the rest room, she hinted that she'd like to see what it was like with one of those dancers before she swore to be faithful to one man for the rest of her life."

I thought about Jason Summerfield's admission that Tawny wasn't into sex.

And Karen was saying, "since I tell all my girls to be sure before they tie the knot, I'm glad she's experiencing life."

Diane leaned forward, grinning. "There was this one brother comin' on to me big-time. Karen gave each of us some fun money and if my man ever learned I'd done this, he'd stroke, but I bought *three* table dances from that hunk of dark chocolate." She let out a whoop and squirmed in her seat.

Then Heather grinned sheepishly and announced, "The Few, the Proud—"

"The Marines!" the group yelled in unison.

They'd been transported back to Frank's Place—lock, stock, and libido.

Heather turned to me. "Please don't get me wrong, Miss Shelley. I love my husband, but . . ." For lack of a word, she fanned her flushed face with her luncheon napkin.

"Don't forget, girls," Karen said. "It doesn't matter where you get your appetite, as long as you eat at home."

The three girls burst out laughing, laughs likely fed by nervousness as much as by memories of delightfully naughty images from across the river.

My face felt hot. If I stayed here much longer, I, too, would have to resort to fanning. The talk didn't embarrass me. But I hadn't "eaten at home"—or anywhere else for that matter—since the last millennium.

Karen gave me a knowing look, then said, "Miss Shelley, I'm

sure Tawny is just having her fun before the Big Forever. I'll call you as soon as I hear from her."

I returned to my office and put on a fresh pot of coffee to chase the chill out of my bones. While I waited for it to brew, I put in a call to Frank's Place. The voice on the other end of the phone—male? female? who could tell?—told me they would open at eight that evening. I considered my options, then called my son.

The rain showed no sign of letting up, and Vic Shelley's bank account would be suffering. He'd worked for a lawn service the last several months, and precipitation played hell with the hours. Vic was used to living meager—figuring that anything was an improvement over the cellblock he'd inhabited for two years at the state pen—but I threw money his way when I could. Thing was, he'd only take it if he could earn it.

"You ever heard of the Windsor Ballet?" I asked.

"Sure. Hasn't everybody?" The *shink* of his cigarette lighter came over the wires, followed by a long sigh as he blew smoke. "Getting frisky, Mom?"

"No." I hurried to explain. I filled him in on the kid who'd called and his missing fiancee and the place where she was last seen. "I need to go over there, Vic, talk to some of the employees, see if I can get a lead on who she left with."

"Want company, is that it?"

"Probably wouldn't be a bad idea. But," I added, "if it looks like I'm gonna get lucky . . ."

"Yeah, right, Mom."

That deflated me. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Oh, I don't doubt you could snag one. But I've heard that those guys will lose their jobs if they're caught fraternizing. Do you want that guilt?"

"I'll let you know after I see them in action."

My grandmother always said you could catch more bees with honey than with vinegar. With that in mind I locked up early and headed home, with a side trip to the mall for a beekeeper's outfit.

I spent longer than usual getting ready, applying every trick in the middle-aged woman's book and employing all my lotions and potions, polishers and buffers, lacquer and shimmer.

Vic pulled into the drive, his headlamps shooting streaks of light across the living room walls. I belted my trench coat and hurried to the car.

We drove into the Motor City quickly going over our plan before falling silent. The Ambassador Bridge was dark and wet, and when we crested its arch, the lights of Canada winked invitingly. There's a concrete tunnel that takes you under the Detroit River and to the other side, but it freaks me out to think about all that black, eerie water on top of me. I stuck with the bridge.

Passing through the customs gate was uneventful, drawing the usual questions. Nationality? Reason for entering Canada? Length of stay? Tobacco? After Vic declared a half pack of Camels, we were on our way.

For my money, Vic and I were an odd-looking pair. He wore black leather jeans with a matching jacket over a tight T-shirt in a shimmery silver that matched the rings in his ears, nose, and brows. He always wears the hardware—it wasn't added for tonight's soiree—but combined with the clothes it made him look like Ricky Martin meets Marilyn Manson.

I'd stuffed myself into one of those Victoria's Secret Miracle bras with the liquid enhancement guaranteed to create more cleavage, then slipped into the silk bikini panties that the salesgirl insisted should be worn with it. I'd covered it all with a black chenille sweater unbuttoned to the bra's little satin bow. I've been told I've got killer gams, so tonight I chose to use them to

their max by wearing a short flippy black skirt and no stockings and what Vic calls FM shoes—sexy, spiked

I felt like a hooker. Which, in a sense, I was. I needed to hook some interest, gain entry through the door that led to the disappearance of Tawny Malone.

We blended right in. Everyone was dressed to thrill. As we waited in the long line, I observed our cohorts. Most of them were women, in groups of three or more. There were a few guys, too—apparently boyfriends or husbands who wouldn't let their other halves come alone. So to speak. I supposed there was the chance that some of these guys were gay and had brought the females along as beards.

We paid ten bucks a head cover charge, and I would later learn that the cheapest drink you could get was a small bottle of water for five bucks. I stopped toying with the idea of giving my client a break on expenses.

Inside, there were rows of tables with folding chairs on either side that put me in mind of a school cafeteria. But there were also a few tables for two along a rail that separated the floor into upper and lower levels, and we made our way toward an empty one at the far end.

My mouth dropped open, then clamped shut just as quickly as I reminded myself to act cool. Near-nude men were everywhere, surrounded by women clutching alcohol in one hand and fistfuls of singles in the other. Since we'd been warned at the door that there was no touching, I figured keeping your hands full kept you from crossing the line.

The room was large, dark, with flashing colored lights. A spotlight alternated with strobes to showcase the stage.

The squeal of a mike getting juice washed over the crowd, then a female emcee announced, "Frank is on *fire*!" and a thumping club mix of George Strait singing "They Call Me the Fireman" brought out Frank the Firefighter. He warmed up

fast shedding his yellow fireman's jacket and snap off suspendered pants while women lined the foot of the stage and stretched to stuff greenbacks into Frank's black boots and red G-string (extra large and not much room for the greenbacks at that).

I tore my eyes away long enough to check out the other costumes in the room. The military was in full force. I remembered the girls at the insurance office and tried to remind myself that I was here on a job. There were headhunters—both corporate and African—and a police officer and a cowboy and, well, just about everything to fulfil any fantasy a gal might have.

Yee haw. Cowboy was making his way toward me. I could've worn my Tony Lama's and saved the money I'd spent on my getup.

Something about him clicked with me and it was obviously a two way street. If it's never happened to you, you won't understand it. But it's a spark, a chemistry, an electric charge that hits your crotch (yes, it happens to females, too), and you're ready to jump into bed, no questions asked, no commitments given, none expected. It had happened to me only one other time. I hadn't acted upon it and later had sworn I wouldn't make *that* mistake again. From time to time, that first guy's face still visits me.

Cowboy sauntered on over and I could hear his spurs jingle-jangle jingle. I wriggled in my chair. He was wearing fringed leather chaps and a matching G-string and he looked like the outdoors type—tanned with sun bleached hair. His blue eyes locked mine, asked if I wanted a private party. But before I could dig ten bucks out of my pocket for a table dance, Vic spoke.

"Brower? That you?"

God forgive me, I'd forgotten that my son was sitting next to

me. I broke out in a cold sweat and wondered if my pounding heart could be seen above my Miracle bra.

"What the hell?" Cowboy leaned in. "Shelley? Hey, man, don't use my real name in here. I'm Big Billy Broncbuster." He stole a glance at me, then said to Vic, "What are *you* doin' here?"

Vic kept the cover. "Birthday present for my mother." He nodded toward me.

I grinned sheepishly. "What can I say? An old lady gets curious."

"*Mother?* No way." He gave me a wolfish grin. "Mother I'd like to—"

"MILF?" Vic set fire to a Camel and the flare of light made his warning expression appear sinister. "Only if *she* says so, Brower. Why are you working here?"

"Pays the bills and then some. You know what it's like getting a job after you get out."

"You got that."

"Can't complain, though. I'm the super in my apartment building over in Detroit, too. Gives me a place to stay and the tenants mind their own business, if you get my drift."

Seriously, he continued, eyeing me again, "who's your friend?"

"Seriously," I said, "I'm Vic's mom."

Just then Vic said, "Looks like your boss is headin' over here, man."

Big Billy Broncbuster jumped up, shouted, "Well, happy birthday, Mama," and got down to business. The boss moved on, as did Vic, while I got a free table dance.

When he was through, he quickly whispered his home address in my ear. "I could get canned for this, but I'd really like to spend some time with you. Vic will vouch for me. I'll be there fifteen minutes after we close." Before I could respond, he'd turned and walked away.

After a minute, I went in search of the ladies room. The corridors were dimly lit and I almost started down the wrong one. As I turned to retrace my steps, I noticed Big Billy at the far end, leaning out an exit door. He stepped inside and a blonde in a royal blue dress stepped in and kissed his cheek, then pivoted and disappeared into the night.

It was Karen Peel.

Take me there, Vic,' I said after we were back in Detroit.

"Mom—"

"Vic, I'll be fine. Really."

"But—"

"But nothing. It's the only lead I've got. I'll play along with him a little, try and find out what his connection is to Karen Peel, or Millennium Insurance, or maybe even Tawny Malone. If it's a coincidence, then I can at least ask him if any of the other guys were bragging about sacking a bride-to-be over the weekend."

Why don't you just call the cops, let them check it out?'

"No. I don't have enough yet. I mean, look how he was with me. Maybe he's that way with all the women my age, figures we'll tip more or something."

"That's what worries me. What if he wants the or something'?"

"I know how to handle myself. Besides, I've got all I need." I patted the coat pocket that held my S&W .22 snub nose.

Vic pulled out his wallet and removed a cellophane packet and handed it to me. "Now you have all you need.

I was nervous, but I didn't want him to know it. I stepped out of the car and turned to him with a grin. "How old is this thing, anyway?"

———

Brower opened the door before I finished knocking, offered to take my coat. I declined—offered me a cup of coffee, and, basically, acted more nervous than I felt.

'I haven't made the coffee yet,' he said, punching numbers on a cordless phone. 'I need to check messages, see if anyone in the building has a problem that can't wait 'til morning.'

I took that as a good sign. He was serious about this job and he wasn't planning on getting me drunk. 'Point me to the kitchen, Billy,' I said. 'I'll make the coffee.'

'Call me Bill. Big Billy Bronchbuster never leaves the club.'

As I set the steaming mugs on the coffee table, he cradled the phone and joined me on the couch. I was shaking from the tension. And before I knew it I was straddling him and he was asking me what made Mary happy and before I could respond, his hands were expertly answering his own question. There was no blind groping like in high school, no more questions, no clichés.

He was ready quick, and I attributed that both to his youth and to his training. My body heated up. I wanted it. I wanted him. But my mind struggled with it. I was here to get a lead on a case. Vic was outside, waiting in the car. Somewhere in the Motor City, a kid worried that his future wife was in danger.

What difference would a few more minutes make?

Knuckles, sharp, on the door startled me and I bit Bill's lip. He groaned, and I sensed it was more from the interruption than the injury. In any case, everything came to a screeching stop. He squeezed me to him quickly, said he had to answer it—it was part of the job.

I nodded, unable to speak.

He said it might be better if no one saw me.

I nodded again, gasped as I pulled away, then gathered my clothes and ducked into the kitchen. I pushed the door to, leav

ing a crack, and ditched the light as he opened the apartment door.

"Sis, I thought you were going home. What are you doing here this late?"

I moved to the crack, tried to get a look at Bill's sister, but he was between us.

"I need your help," she said. "The little prick hired a snoop."

The voice was a panicked whisper.

"What?" Bill said. "Wait a minute. Didn't your friend go back home after she'd cooled her heels?"

There was a brief silence, followed by Bill's voice. "Then tell her to. That's between him and her."

"I can't do that."

The woman spoke evenly then. I thought I recognized her voice, but I'd only heard it once before.

"What the hell do you mean, you can't? I warned you not to carry this too far. What happened? Did she change her mind?"

"You don't understand!"

I took another peek. I was right. Bill Brower and Karen Peel were brother and sister. Did he have something to do with Tawny Malone's disappearance? It didn't sound like it. Or at least it sounded like Tawny *had* wanted to have some fun before settling down.

"Sis, calm down. Why don't you go home and we'll figure out something tomorrow, okay?"

He closed the door and I thought about how to handle this new development.

"Mary?" He rapped lightly on the door, then came in. "Sorry about that. You know how relatives can. God, you're shivering!"

I looked down. All my clothes were in a wad in my arms.

He grabbed a throw blanket from a chair and wrapped it around my shoulders, then steered me to the couch and enveloped me in his warmth.

He volunteered most of the story — the part he knew, anyway. His sister had told him that one of her employees needed some time away to think, that she was supposed to be getting married soon but had gotten cold feet.

He'd provided a vacant apartment where Karen had stashed the girl.

"What? You mean she's here? In this building?"

He pulled away from me. "You're not going to tell my boss, are you? I mean, it was just for a couple of days, and I hated to turn down my sister."

"Of course I'm not going to tell your boss. I just think that girl owes it to her fiancé to let him know she's all right. Why don't we at least go to her apartment and see if we can get her to call him?"

"I don't know. I promised Karen that no one would bother her friend."

"What if it were your girlfriend? Wouldn't you want to know if she was okay?"

After a moment, he said, "I suppose you're right. But we can't pressure her if she doesn't want to."

"Got it."

I started getting dressed, surprised that I wasn't embarrassed.

He pulled me to him. "Can't we finish what we started before my sister butted in?"

I gave him a promising kiss. "*After* we talk to the girl."

Bill led me to an apartment at the end of a dark hallway on the third floor.

When he knocked, a muffled voice said, "Yes?"

"It's Bill Brower, ma'am."

The door opened slightly. The face that peered out belonged to Karen Peel. "Bill, it's me."

I stepped back so she wouldn't see me.

Bill said, "Sis? What—? Is your friend here?"

"She went home. That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Then why are you here?"

She didn't answer.

I had a funny feeling about the whole thing. I touched the handgun in my pocket for security.

"Karen, I asked you a question."

Okay, she's here. But she doesn't want to leave.

I stepped forward. "Let her tell us that."

Karen shrieked and her eyes went wild. She tried to shut the door as I pushed against it. Bill gave it a shove. Karen fell backward onto the couch, then lunged for a gun on the coffee table. I dropped, grappling for my weapon as she fired frantically, repeatedly.

I drew a bead on Karen, but not in time.

Bill fell.

Karen cried out, crawled to where her brother lay on the floor. Her face went blank. She put the gun to her own head and fired.

My ears were ringing. Vic stormed into the room, then picked up the phone.

I touched the spot on Bill's lip where my lips had been only minutes earlier. He was covered with his sister's blood and I'd left only a tiny mark, but I knew precisely where it was. Trembling, I struggled to my feet and went in search of Tawny Malone.

She was in the bedroom, strapped to the bed with electrical tape, naked except for a white wedding veil. A wide band of masking tape was slapped over her mouth. Her eyes, frantic, followed me as I found a blanket and threw it over her.

I started to remove the tape from her mouth. "All at once is best."

She nodded and I ripped it away.

She gasped and gulped air. Tears rolled from her eyes. Her lips were swollen, bleeding.

I winced, started working her arms free. "Lucky she didn't use the electrical tape on your mouth. It's a hell of a lot harder to get off."

"That's what she started with." The voice was raspy. "But it was taking too long to remove it when she wanted to . . . to kiss me."

Vic checked in on us, went to the kitchen for a glass of water for Tawny. He announced that the cops and paramedics should arrive soon.

I gave Tawny my name and explained that I was working for her fiancé.

She told her story then, between crying jags. Karen had made it all sound so innocent and fun, had convinced her that they should spend a wild night together, had promised that no one would ever know. Tawny admitted she was curious, that she'd been with very few men and no women. Karen had convinced her it wasn't really like cheating since it wasn't with another man. So, after getting caught up in the atmosphere and the thrill of the strip club, she'd agreed.

"I liked it that night. The whole thing was sort of . . . surreal. It was like no one else existed. But the next morning I felt so ashamed. Karen kept insisting that she wanted more. I told her no, that it had been a big mistake. She went crazy. Suddenly she had a gun." Tawny stared off in space for a moment, then started crying again. "I've ruined my life."

"Ruined? Only if you let it ruin you."

"Jason will never forgive me."

"Who says he has to know?"

Her eyes opened wide. She stopped crying.

The paramedics showed up and I rose to leave. Tawny

stopped me. "Would you call him for me, have him meet us at the hospital?"

I told her I would and went to the living room phone. After I hung up, I gave the cops a condensed version of what had happened that night. I left out the part about being in Bill Brower's apartment. I couldn't talk about it yet, and if they found reason to dust his place for prints, they'd know where to find me.

Vic dropped me off at my house, but I was restless. I got in my car and started driving.

Parking in front of my office building is easier to come by at four in the morning. I got out of the car and started up the flight of stairs, then changed my mind and walked a few blocks to a twenty-four-hour hole in the-wall that offers some of the best food in the city.

The rain was turning to sleet. I snugged my trench coat tighter, shoved my hands in its pockets, felt the cold steel of my .22. Detroit was dreary in daylight, ominous at night. Normally I wouldn't be caught dead walking here after dark. But after what I'd been through, I didn't care.

I'd been off my game, had let my urges — more than that, my loneliness — get in the way of my investigative skills. If anyone wanted a piece of me tonight, I probably deserved the grief.

An odd, fatal numbness overtook me. If you've never been there, then the better for you. It manifests itself as a cold calculation and you know you could draw your weapon on someone who's screwing with you and blow him away in one fluid movement. You're programmed. You take the shit, deal with it, give no thought to seeing another day. You push the envelope, make fate come looking for you.

The diner was nearly empty and I chose a booth and put my back to the wall. After shedding the dripping coat and folding it

beside me. I ordered coffee and started reading over the plastic menu.

A man slid in across from me. "What's a dame like you doing out all alone?"

Without looking up from the menu, I reached into the pocket of my coat and pulled out my piece and laid it on the table between us.

I saw a dark streak as he bolted for the door.

The waitress came with a mug and a steaming pot. I ordered my steak bloody. She set down the cup and filled it, taking care not to splash coffee on my gun.

GOOD CAREER MOVES

Robert S. Levinson

When this happened in the sixties the old Charlie Chaplin movie lot that hogged the southeast corner of Sunset Boulevard and La Brea Avenue had already passed through the hands of Red Skelton, the television clown, and become home to A&M Records for Herbie Alpert and his Tijuana Brass, Jewish hombres from Fairfax High who'd scored big with 'The Lonely Bull' and turned Herbie into what the music business guys were calling a multibullionaire.

I was only a kid then, a Fairfax High dropout full of ambition and dreams about cutting my own records as a producer or with tunes I'd been cranking out for a few years, but paying my dues down Sunset at Crossroads of the World, in the Blue Moon Studios, a set of connecting offices that included one of the town's first sixteen-track boards at a time when major labels like Columbia, RCA, Capitol and Liberty were still ping-ponging four tracks and reserving the few eight tracks for their biggest names on the roster like Elvis, of course, the Beach Boys, Jan & Dean, and—are you ready for this?—Bobby Vee.

I was Blue Moon's all-purpose boy, the all-around gofer, the schlepp with the broom they'd yell at, 'Gofer cigarettes! Gofer coffee! Gofer sandwiches!"

But that was okay by me, because it put me close to Hoagy Stevens.

Hoagy was my idol.

He was a big, imposing guy, a blond, muscular, and broad-

shouldered six footer who was handsome in a surfer kind of way, like he belonged lifting weights at Muscle Beach, not holed up ten going on twenty hours every day including weekends in a hot recording booth that stank on high from the nicotine-stained walls spilled beer, and state takeout. His bad teeth, crooked and smoker yellow, were his one visible flaw and they kept him from ever smiling.

You didn't have to watch Hoagy work much in the booth to know he was the best record producer around, although there was no way of spotting all the tricks that put him on top.

Verb. Reverb. Echo.

Doubling vocals or even turning a solo into the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

Hoagy knew them all.

He invented a lot of them.

Listening today to the catalog of number ones and Top Tens Hoagy placed on the *Billboard*, *Cash Box* and *Record World* charts, you might be inclined to take the tricks for granted and not give him his full due, so take my word for it.

Hoagy Stevens was the best.

The one everybody wanted to work with, the stars and the start-ups.

The one who signed "exclusive" independent production deals with four majors at once and not one of them squawked about it.

Yes. That immense.

The biggest.

Numero uno with a bullet.

Hoagy wasn't much out of high school himself and this kind of success had the effect on him you might expect. It gave him an ego the size of Manhattan, the Bronx and Staten Island, too, and an attitude the far side of insufferable.

Even the Big Ones he agreed to produce had to put up with

Hoagy's star attitude and demands in the studio, larger and louder than their own most of the time.

They didn't like that. "Don't let the speed bumps stop you on the way out," Hoagy would tell them, and, to let them know he meant it, he would pull out all the operator plugs and move all the board dials and levers to zip.

Then he'd settle back in his captain's chair, prop his feet on the deck, take a deep drag on his joint, and shoot thick grass rings at the studio window.

"Who do you think you are, Phil Spector?" someone once screamed at Hoagy. Because of the so-called Wall of Sound he invented, Phil was the only West Coast producer who ever came even remotely close to rivaling Hoagy's reputation as a genius.

Picturing that moment now, I recall it was Spector who did the screaming, adding to a legend that would eventually outlast and outclass Hoagy's, but not then and definitely not at the Fog Cutter.

The Fog Cutter was Edna Earle's jumping restaurant and bar about a mile up the street from Blue Moon, at La Brea and Hollywood, where the music crowd congregated before, during, and after business hours.

Hoagy went sometimes, usually when he had something to brag about, like a hit climbing the charts or a new singer he was in the studio with and could make predictions about, how they were sure to be the next big thing and so on and so forth.

Hoagy was usually right.

That's why stars who were in need of a career makeover were treated by Hoagy like elephant pudding sticking to the soles of his handmade Italians.

That's one reason why so many in the business wound up resenting him.

Another. He'd put down other producers like they were terminally sick animals.

Another. He'd listen a few beats on demos from wanna bes before ripping it off the tape deck and flinging it aside, cruelly ranting how the music sucked and the lyrics would stink even if they did have a hook.

One thing I always had to say about Hoagy.

He was fair-minded when it came to insulting people.

An *equal opportunity prick*, in the words of some.

No, make that just about everybody he encountered and melted with his mean slash of a mouth and eyes that took no prisoners.

I was one of the few exceptions, although I'd be hard pressed after all this time to say why, except maybe it was because I was the only one who never left him sitting alone at the Fog Cutter the way everyone else did when they saw him coming, or as soon after that as possible.

Listen and learn was my motto, and a fake ID I'd paid ten bucks for to a hippie shark navigating the Venice pier on roller skates was my ticket into the bar, whenever I knew Hoagy was heading over.

I'd slide into the seat next to him and order a tall-necked Lucky Lager, and that remained my place until Hoagy was ready to scram, often four sheets to the wind, on legs as unreliable as a junkie's promise.

I'd pour Hoagy into a cab or drive him to his lavish spread up Laurel Canyon a couple miles, preferably the former. The latter meant sacking out there for the night once I wrestled him out of his gear and under the covers, no easy feat when you're dealing with a badass mean drunk.

You'd think spending this kind of time under my hero's roof would be something to brag about.

Not so.

Hoagy made it screaming clear the first time or two that he didn't need company when he rolled out of bed in the morning

and how I was well advised to clear out before he wiped up the sundeck with me leading me to the theory that even when Hoagy was sober he was drunk, or started sunlight on a breakfast of poppers a toot or two of great Colombian, maybe some barely stepped on snow, which I had noticed him drifting into more and more.

I'd dump my tennies, spread my bones on one of his posh couches, set my mental alarm clock for the first birdie chirping hints of daylight and hoof it down to the Canyon, where I could count on thumbing a ride to Hollywood Boulevard and Crescent from some early-bird commuter.

I lived just south of there in a pad next to a modest two story apartment building from the thirties, where the famous Hollywood gossip columnist Sidney Skolsky lived He was pointed out to me soon after I moved in or I wouldn't have known this little guy in the horn-rims and rumpled suit, who looked like he belonged behind the deli counter at Cantors on Fairfax trimming the fat from the hot pastramis and corned beefs

I knew his name and made a point of introducing myself Sidney was famous as the guy who discovered Marilyn Monroe before she became Marilyn Monroe, who drove him around town even after she became Marilyn Monroe and for this tag line hook But don't get me wrong, I love Hollywood "

Sidney didn't drive either, and that became our common bond.

I often strolled up Crescent with him to Schwab's, the drugstore where he was as much a fixture as the fluorescent lights He didn't know much about rock and roll, but he had a natural curiosity about the music business He was always tossing out questions at me in his nigh pitched New York accent, and reminding me "You ever onto something big, some new act, you let me hear but first, exclusive, and I'll do right by you "

Schwab's was Sidneys home-away-from home hangout He

took phone calls and put together his syndicated daily column from his desk in the Schwab office above the pharmacy. Me, I'd shmooze over coffee for a while at the counter with the waitresses and the unemployed actor types cadging free reads out of today's *Daily Variety* and *Hollywood Reporter*, then get to hustling.

Anyway, this particular morning, before I can scram Hoagy's place, I hear a voice calling at my back. "Hold on, dude. I'll go with you."

The voice was wrestler husky, but on the turnaround I saw it belonged to a drop-dead gorgeous babe garishly dressed in a tie dyed sack dress, looking the poster child for some rally of flower children. She wore a crown of wilted red carnations on top of raggedy black hair that hung down her back almost to her waist and too much goop on eyes redder than her plush lips, which were the color of sails in the sunset.

Approaching, she said, "Peace," gave me the salute, and wondered, "You ditching these digs, I'll join you."

"Where'd you come from?" I said.

"San Francisco." She shifted her army surplus knapsack from her shoulder to the mosaic tile flooring and rotated and rubbed the arm. "You don't know what heavy is until you're packing around your life in one of those."

"I mean, just now."

"Where do you think?" She aimed a thumb over her shoulder in the direction of Hoagy's bedroom. "Been playing mattress to the main man in there since the weekend. He's got the blow for me, I got the job for him. Name's Eve. Eve Eden, like in the *Garden of*—you know? Not my real one, of course, the Eden part, just the Eve, and I'm thinking of changing it again, anyway. Who are you?"

I told her.

'Your name's Adam? You gotta be shitting me.'

I raised my hand to take an oath.

"Really."

Her childish face swung left and right to the beat of her raucous laugh. "It's karma, man. It's gotta be karma. Adam meets Eve, although this sure as shit ain't no Garden of Eden, even though it does come furnished with its own snake in residence.' Eve studied me for a few seconds. 'Or do you make it two snakes?"

"You can admire a guy's work without admiring the guy," I said, wondering why I even found it necessary to defend myself to this groupie.

'I can dig it,' she said. She retrieved the knapsack and slung it over a shoulder. 'So. We splitting or what?'

"Hoagy? Won't he miss you?"

She shrugged indifference. "Not as much as I won't miss him," she said. 'Besides, he's dead to the world.'

"Leave him a note?"

'Adam, I wasn't here for love or the duration or anything like that. He conned me down here, saying he loved my music after I played my demo tape for him. Said my songs knocked him out. Murdered him. All's I needed was him behind me in the studio and I was sure of a trip to the big time. The bastard was behind me, all right.' She contorted her face into something ugly. "Behind me and every other direction, any which way you can think of, baby, and we never even made it to the studio.'

This was a side of Hoagy Stevens I didn't know about, although I'd heard him say it to other babes. To guys, too. All of them doing better than good where Hoagy followed up, which looked to be most of the time. I didn't want to believe Eve, but there was a kind of truth in the way she said it that told me she wasn't lying.

I said, 'So you'll be heading back to Frisco, then?'

San Francisco. It's San Francisco, not ever Frisco, and, no, not till I make enough for a Greyhound. Even the street is better'n staying here. Unless, of course, you could front me the money, especially when I promise to pay it back soon as I could."

She put a question mark on her face.

I was short on walking around money and it would be days before payday with no way of getting another advance. Just two days ago, I begged one in order to cover me on two months' back rent.

Believe me, I tell anyone who'll listen, there's absolutely no percentage in starting out poor, so I knew where Eve was coming from as well as I understand where she wanted to go.

We were settled into my place within the hour. I told her to take the bedroom and I'd sack out on the couch for the duration. She nixed that idea pronto, telling me she didn't care about sharing the same mattress if I didn't care.

"Don't worry, I won't try any funny stuff," I said. "I'm not that kind of guy."

Eve tucked her head and made a *Who's kidding who?* face.

"That would be a first for me, Adam, unless you're trying to say you're that other kind of guy."

"No, really," I said. "Not every guy is like you described Hoagy."

"Every guy I've ever met, going on back to junior high. Besides, don't be so sure I'm not that kind of girl. I'm attracted to you, you want to know the truth. You want to know the truth, Adam?"

I didn't know how to answer. No girl had ever said that to me before. I could feel the fire burning in my cheeks.

Eve laughed and said, "Let's get this over with, baby. Nothing to it but to do it."

In half a minute she was out of her clothes and leading me back into the bedroom.

She had me undressed two minutes after that. She pushed me onto the bed, on my back, and settled next to me on top of the covers. She smothered me with sex, with a body that was all woman, guiding me through things I'd never seen or read about in *Rogue* or *Cavalier*.

I didn't want it to end.

When it finally did, both of us sweaty, exhausted, and struggling for breath on the cold, corrupt tile of my bathroom floor she said, "I need you to listen to my demo and tell me what you really honestly think, Adam."

Okay, so maybe I was predisposed to love what I heard on her tape, but even if I wasn't—Eve Eden had it big-time.

BIG-TIME!

Her songs were a blend of some of the other girl singer-songwriters who were kicking around the business and beginning to get rumbles—like Joni Mitchell, who was hanging out with Nash, Stills, Crosby, and that crowd; Laura Nyro, with personal manager David Geffen in tow; and Carole King, somebody Lou Adler over at Ode Records was getting ready to spring out—but the six cuts were also uniquely her own.

Her voice?

Something else again.

Sometimes Joplin. Sometimes an angel in disguise.

Always Eve Eden.

An original.

She could be my passport from goler to the Boardwalks and Park Places of the biz.

"You're sensational, Eve. You and your music."

She smiled and seemed to take it as her due.

"So you'll manage me, then?"

"You can do better than me," I said, not believing what I'd just heard.

Eve was offering to cut me in without my even asking.

"You mean with some prick like Hoagy Stevens? Unh-unh. I trust you, Adam. I can tell you'll take good care of me." She threw out her hand. "Here. Shake on it, and we got us a deal. Partners. Fifty fifty. I make it big, you make it big. Just like Elvis and the Colonel."

Sidney Skolsky once told me there used to be a movie producer by the name of Samuel Goldwyn who was always getting his thoughts mangled and is supposed to have said once, "An oral contract isn't worth the paper it's written on."

I told Sidney how the same idea was a truth that grew like grass weed in the music business, where it sometimes got so bad you couldn't even trust yourself.

Taking Eve's hand, I knew I'd have to do something about that, but first things first.

First, I had to figure out how to keep Eve in Los Angeles.

Also first, how and where to get her a record deal.

Also first, what to do about Hoagy Stevens.

In fact, Hoagy first-first.

However they came together, he'd heard Eve's tape. She said he told her it knocked him out. Murdered him. Those were things I'd only heard him say when he believed it. As much as I didn't want to, I had to give Hoagy first shot. It was the ethical thing to do, and I was still green enough in the business to believe that ethics counted for something.

While Eve was showering, I padded into the living room and dialed Hoagy's private number. His answering service came on. Faye, the girl working the board, recognized my voice immediately and said, "He hasn't been picking up since last night, Adam."

I left a short message telling Hoagy it was about Eve Eden and her tape, then took her up on her invitation to join her in the shower.

I went over to Sidney's apartment and told him about Eve and what I had in mind.

"Is she a peach?" Sidney wanted to know, giving me a Hollywood wink and an all-knowing grin.

"It's not like that between us, Sidney."

"It will be, Adam. Before you know it. Probably already is."

"No, really. Eve has talent not to be believed."

"That's what they all say. Sometimes it really has something to do with acting, singing, or dancing, or maybe some combination. Other times . . ." His voice drifted into silence as he shook his head and made a clucking noise.

He reached for the phone and dialed. Schwabs. turned from me and cupped his hand over the mouthpiece while he spoke. Hung up and advised, "If your Eve can start today, she's got a job for a while."

He gave me that grin again.

"No, really, Sidney. This gal's got it in spades. Talent to burn."

I'd brought along my portable deck with Eve's tape and asked him to listen and decide for himself. He made a go-ahead gesture and settled back in his easy chair. One song segued into the next, and most of the time Sidney sat motionless, his face giving away nothing. A few times, to her up-tempo numbers, his foot would start tapping impulsively.

After the last cut, I looked at him for judgment.

Sidney said finally, "Not Dinah Shore or Peggy Lee, but an interesting voice. The words don't always rhyme. Irving and Cole. Ira. Sammy Cahn, they know how to make the words rhyme. This Eve of yours should listen to them sometimes."

Later the three of us walked up to Schwab's together. Sidney enchanted by Eve even before we'd made the turn onto Crescent Heights and telling her several times how she had a lot of the same qualities as the young Marilyn.

I left them there after a fast hug and another thank-you on the cheek from Eve and headed down Sunset to Crossroads of the World and Blue Moon.

I already thought of myself as her manager, not the schlepp with the broom, and was sweating like a leaky fire hydrant in anticipation of confronting Hoagy.

My plan was to hand over the dupe of her tape in my windbreaker pocket, tell him what had happened, and offer to work out some deal if Hoagy was still inclined to produce Eve.

Only, Hoagy wasn't there and, unlike him for this time of day, hadn't checked in.

I tried his private number again and still couldn't do any better than the answering service.

Two weeks later Hoagy was still missing, Eve was a hit at Schwab's and pulling in big tips, and Sidney's observation had proven oh so true. I was in love with her, no longer only her talent. Even better, she never tired of telling me how much I'd come to mean to her, how much of an inspiration I was.

We would steal into Blue Moon after hours, after her shift, and lay down new demo tracks, me on the studio upright and Eve on an acoustic guitar, pouring out lyrics that often began as scribbled thoughts on a Schwab's napkin.

At some point she always said, "You're my inspiration, Adam," like it was some cue, and we'd make desperate love behind the drum kit baffles while her songs floated overhead like deserving orphans fearing they would never find a home.

They did, though.

By accident, not because I'd somehow transformed into some great shakes as a personal manager.

We were celebrating our one month anniversary at Edna Earle's over prime rib and champagne. Eve announced she had a surprise for me and led me by the hand over to the piano bar. She sat me on the bench next to her, whispered, "I wrote this today, baby, just for you," and launched into a driving ballad with a lyric hook great enough to land Moby Dick.

The bar was cluttered with the usual music types, who clapped their mitts red, let out howls of approval, and shouted demands for more than Eve obliged, drunk beyond any buzz the champagne had given her.

Buddy Charles was among them.

That Buddy Charles.

Mr. Big Banana Records himself, in from New York and making the scene with his West Coast honchos.

He introduced himself unnecessarily and helped himself to a seat at our table after Eve finished. Talking to her like I didn't exist, he said, "I don't know who you are or where you're from, but if you wrote the songs that went with that voice, I want to sign you to Big Banana."

Eve clutched my leg under the table. Her hand was shaking hard enough to set my thigh shaking. Then, after a moment, deadpan, in a voice as self assured as a kitten's purr, she responded to the biggest record business break anyone could get shy of signing with Ahmet or Clive by telling Buddy Charles, "You'll hafta talk to my manager here."

Buddy Charles looked at me like a piece that didn't fit his jigsaw puzzle, then broke into a smile as big as the retail numbers on a Beatles album.

"Buddy Charles," he said, shooting his hand across the table.

By the end of the week, we had our deal on paper with Big Banana, signed, sealed, and delivered. The numbers were in six figures for two albums a year for three years, with options, and, of course, we had to split publishing with Buddy's publishing company, Big Orange. All in all, given a hit single or two, Eve was going to come out of it a millionaire, with me the same at fifty percent.

What excited her almost as much as the prospect of becoming a star and as rich as Cher or Diana Ross was the billboard on the Sunset Strip she'd been promised by Buddy Charles.

"Wait'll my folks hear that," she said after the signing photos were taken for the trades. "Too cool. They only do that for the acts they really dig big, baby."

"Didn't you tell me once you were an orphan?"

Eve gave me a baffled look, like she was about to blow the $64,000 question. "Why would I say that?" she said, and quickly slid into another subject.

Okay, so it wasn't the first time I'd stumbled into a lie from her.

Not the last time either.

I should have suspected something was wrong between us long before now, by the way Eve always ducked putting our deal on paper, like I was asking for sex and she had a Mount Vesuvius of a headache.

I learned what it was that night.

From Hoagy Stevens.

Eve and I had taken a silent stroll back to my place from Schwab's after I gave the details of her deal to Sidney—the payback exclusive I owed him for his friendship—and she had punched out for the last time to a hail of good-lucks and we always knew you-had-it in-vous from her coworkers and the counter regulars.

The honk-honking before we turned into the entrance walk stopped us.

Hoagy was parked across the street in his silver and gold Rolls half a head poking out the driver's window, and waving us over, wearing his version of a smile, the streetlight bouncing off his oiled, deep cocoa colored suntan.

He read the look on my face and said, "I know, I know. Surprise. Hop in the back. I'll explain everything after we get up to my digs."

We settled in Hoagy's living room and passed on his offer of drinks.

"Okay, then," he said. "To answer the big one first, I've been incognito the past month down at the Springs. Drying out and otherwise racking up the rays. You miss me?"

He wasn't asking me the question.

He was asking Eve.

She didn't answer.

She had a glum look and averted her eyes anytime I tried to get her attention.

"What's this all about? What's going on?" I said, although I'd have to be a total dummy not to already have a pretty fair idea and know it was no e-ticket at Disneyland.

Hoagy said, "You want to tell him?" Eve shook her head. "Okay, then. Here goes the down and dirty from me."

He whizzed through it in less than three minutes, like he had it timed out for Top Ten airplay over KHJ in the number one single slot, of course.

In San Francisco, outside the Fillmore for a Bill Graham show headlining Moby Grape, Country Joe and the Fish, and Sly and the Family Stone, Eve had sweet mouthed her way through security to the dressing rooms and straight to Hoagy, who'd been hanging out with Gracie Slick and some of the Airplane.

One thing led to another, then into a piss-stained toilet stall, where she made him listen to her tape while she made him otherwise, like she was delivering mouth to mouth resuscitation of the body and soul.

The tape knocked Hoagy out murdered him, just as Eve had always told me and next thing she knew she was shacking with him here in Los Angeles, only Hoagy wasn't ignoring her music the way Eve had always told me Just the opposite

Hoagy knew he had a star on his hands, except Eve Eden was the kind of talent it would take someone like Buddy Charles and a major label like Big Banana to break big-time Problem was, Hoagy had had a major-league falling-out with Buddy Charles two years ago, the talk of the industry, although nobody could agree on the story behind the story, but bottom line Hoagy was terminally persona non gratas with Buddy

"That's when I thought of you and hatched this plan with Eve here," Hoagy said "Put you together with her, since I knew your ears were good enough to hear the truth on her demo, especially after she worked her special voodoo on you Then just give it time until I heard Buddy Charles would be in town and—take two —set it up for Eve to make it look like an audition by accident Worked like a charm, didn't it, sweetheart?"

Eve avoided our stares focusing on Hoagy's wall of gold and platinum records

"I said, 'Didn't it, sweetheart?' "

She snapped her head around and destroyed the laughter in his eyes with the malice burning in hers

"You're a goddamn pig and you took fucking advantage of me " she said. Turning to me "Whatever I did I was wrong about, baby, even before I fell in love with you

Her expression begged belief

She reached out a hand for me.

I took it.

I waited out most of the anger trying my mind and trying to crack out of my chest before telling him. I'm the lady's manager, Hoagy. The deal we made today with Buddy Charles is our deal, not yours. You stop acting like the dickhead you are, maybe I can talk Buddy into letting you produce her album.

He laughed and said: "How generous of you. A gofer with delusions of adequacy. You're her manager, are you? Tell me, gofer boy—you got it on paper?"

At once I could hear Sidney Skolsky quote Samuel Goldwyn to me:

An oral contract isn't worth the paper it's written on.

Hoagy again, saying, I do. I had her signed, sealed and delivered before I set it up to spring her on you. Tucked away safely, if I have to use it. That prick Buddy Charles will deal with *me* now because Buddy *has* to deal with me. You apologize, get back in line, and maybe we'll let you keep on sweeping out the studio, gofer boy. That right, sweetheart?"

I looked at Eve helplessly.

Tears were raining down her cheeks.

She slipped her hand out of my grip, leaped up, and fled in the direction of Hoagy's bedroom.

Hoagy laughed and said: "Time for you to take a hike, Adam. Eve'll be staying. I'll send someone for her stuff tomorrow."

"Hoagy!" Eve was calling him from the bedroom doorway.

She had the Colt .45 he slept with leveled at him, aiming it with both hands like some television cop.

"I murdered you once, I can do it again," she said, stepping forward. "This time for real, you bum fuck bastard!"

Hoagy laughed at her like it was some giant joke.

"Eve, don't," I said.

Eve did.

Face it. Hoagy got what was coming to him.

There was no reason not to keep him missing.

Either that or Eve was going to prison.

I wasn't going to let that happen.

I pressed her trembling body to mine and told her so and you know how it is when you're watching a silent movie? The scenes flicker past like everyone's running a hundred-yard dash? That's how time became for me after I told her to split while I took care of business: split down to Laurel and thumb back home.

"What about you, baby?"

"Everything's okay. Just go. I'll clean up this mess and see you in an hour or two."

She started to argue with me. I waved her off and pointed to the door.

She gave me a good-bye kiss that could put an Apollo in orbit and a lingering look that could melt Alaska.

"Thank you, baby," she said. "Thank you for everything. Nobody's ever treated me good like you."

After Eve took off, I found the management contract in the file drawer of Hoagy's desk in the den and made a bonfire in the ashtray.

Next, I wiped the Colt .45 clean and stashed it back under his pillow, then pulled a few muscles and worked up a sweat rolling Hoagy inside one of his fancy Persian rugs, so there'd be no blood trail when I dragged him outside and into his Rolls.

I planned to drive up the canyon and onto Mulholland, pull off on one of its dark, isolated stretches, prop Hoagy behind the wheel, slosh some booze on him, and send him sailing down into one of those crash-boom-fiery-bams that happened all the time.

If there was enough of him left to identify, there'd also be

enough people to tell the cops Hoagy's drinking and doping had finally caught up with him.

After that, I'd hustle on back to his pad and clean away any traces of Eve and me and what really happened.

I was halfway to the Rolls when a cop car pulled up the drive, blocking any exit, and a spotlight on me replaced the red whirly bird.

The cop in the passenger seat emerged with me already sighted in his gun while his partner belted out *Dragnet* instructions through a bullhorn, about turning around with my hands locked behind my head.

"That him, miss?" he said.

I heard Eve's voice answering loud and clear. "Him, all right, Officers. The bastard who killed my boyfriend. Jealous bastard. Jealous my boyfriend was going to manage me and not him. Would have killed me, too, if I didn't get the fuck away first."

Tough as it is to score in the record business nowadays, it was ten times tougher back in the sixties. What is it they said when poor sad, drugged out, fat-beyond-Brando Elvis popped one too many and crapped out on the floor of his toilet in Graceland?

Good career move, they said.

That's how Eve told me she saw it, what she did.

"A good career move, baby," she said on her first visit to me at County Jail. "I'll keep on loving you no matter what, and we're fifty fifty partners all the way, so tell me you forgive me?"

To prove her sincerity, she used a chunk of the Big Banana advance to get Melvin Belli, the big criminal lawyer from San Francisco, to represent me, and Belli's slick bluster got the D.A. to stop pressing for the death penalty, especially after he learned Eve planned to change her tune on the witness stand. She in

tended to say Hoagy came at me with a gun and I was only defending myself jealous bastard that I still was.

Even Buddy Charles got into the act telling me not to worry, how my piece of the recording and publishing pies would be deposited in my name like clockwork, the way she wanted, to the letter of our deals with Big Banana and Big Orange.

"Once you're out you've got a slot with me as well as her," Buddy said. "How does vice president in charge of artist development and production sound, Adam?"

Eve had changed her name to something less flower child, more international, by the time the first album was released, dedicated to me.

To you know who and only you and you know why.

It was the chart-busting career making smash I'd always predicted.

Gold turned into platinum for her, and on every single and album after that for the next fourteen years, while I minded my manners, stuck to my own kind and guarded my back bending over for the soap at Folsom.

Eve was waiting for me when I passed through the bars to free air looking every inch the ultimate rock star in the backseat of the limo.

We kissed and touched and she showed me pictures of her two kids with Buddy Charles and broke down crying explaining how the son of a bitch had been stealing us blind all these years.

She said, 'His promises didn't add up to a puddle of piss, baby. There's not a red cent waiting for you. I'm flattening Cher's ass, and the bum fuck bastard's trying to steal my kids from me full time while he drags our divorce through the courts.

I swiped at her tears with my finger and comforted her saying, 'Don't worry. I'm here now. I'll figure out something.'

'Really, baby? Really?" she said inching even closer her hand stroking my thigh.

'Partners, aren't we?"

'Fifty-fifty, baby Fifty-fifty all the way

"All the way, I said with so much sincerity I almost believed it myself

DICKS ARE BLIND

James L. Traylor

In the cold November of my soul I was overcome by the woman.

1.

I was sitting in my car—a leased BMW—on a fashionable side street in Buckhead.

Buckhead is Atlanta" proclaimed a sedate bumper sticker just within my rearview mirror. Soft, dirty rain was coming down, dripping like muck from an overhanging oak tree onto my car. Occasionally I'd clean the windshield to get a better look at the house down the hill. The Jaguar I'd come to know on sight was nowhere to be seen. A single light shone in an upstairs room. It had been on since the rain came.

Candace was her name. Candace Martin. She was twenty-nine, fluffy blond hair, statuesque five-ten. She was, as they say in the South, flat beautiful. Only she wasn't flat at all.

Turner Martin, her husband, owned ProTec, a small enormously profitable software firm which had a suite of offices in the Buckhead Financial Center. Martin was forty-eight. And worried. But it had nothing to do with his software.

I'd walked into that office suite of his, thanking my lucky star and the God of my choice that normality was back. I liked working. When I wasn't working on anything, I tended to brood. And Mal, my wife, didn't like brooders.

"Mr Crawford? Mr. Crawford?" He touched my shoulder. I took his hand.

"Mr Martin," I answered I paused slightly What can I do for you?"

"I m a businessman, Mr. Crawford A successful one. I've devoted my life to making my company work Making money As you can see, I've made it work."

He paused. I waited.

"But that's not why you called."

'No. Not at all I'm worried ' His voice trailed away he gazed from the Buckhead glass tower we were in to its adjacent twin He turned and led me back to his inner office

He closed the door firmly "Candace—that is, my wife, Candace I'm afraid she's having an affair I've been neglectful and I feel all the signs."

I took his cue. "What signs?"

"The usual ones, I guess Little cryptic notes for certain items, no name, of course. Strange purchases on the charge statements which never seem to turn up in our home Phone calls which stop when I come into the room

"How long?"

"Too damn long six or eight months Maybe longer. I've had my head in the sand. Couldn t get it out "

'Any other signs? Has she turned cold? Do you still sleep together?"

He became animated almost grinning. 'Yeah We do Still good, too She loves it ' Then his face clouded "I'm just not sure she loves getting it from me as much as from someone else

I broke in 'I can't make her love you. I can only tell you if there's someone else."

His face quivered slightly The wounded husband fought it out with the entrepreneur. The latter won

"Okay. Just find out. I've got to know. If she's fucking around on me, I want her butt outta my house and outta my life."

He said it almost without emotion, but his words were suddenly coarser, more clipped. His roots were showing.

I rather liked that. But I was damn sure I didn't like his common little problem with his common little wife.

I decided not to antagonize him. I was ready to work again.

2.

Miss Candi in the green Jag was cruising down Northside Drive. The rich part. And I was right there behind her, thinking about nothing but the job, following her taillights, watching them blink back at me in the rain.

She had left the house—which looked like a mansion to me even from the outside—in what seemed to be a hell of a hurry. All I saw was a blur, and all I heard was the whine of those sixteen cylinders.

I thought about the rain and the Jag's notorious dislike of the damp. I chuckled out loud. I didn't recognize my voice.

My mind clicked back to the car. She was racing off to destinations unknown. Once I'd gotten Martin's address, I'd decided not to drive my old Pontiac. Figured Candi would spot me right now as out of place in the neighborhood. The BMW was a short-term lease. Even when they're parked, they're not loitering. Damn! I was even beginning to think like a yuppie.

The speed limit in most of Buckhead's residential areas is thirty-five. Nobody—especially the residents—drives that slow. Usually the cops stop you for going too slow through these streets.

Miss Candi was doing about fifty, on the plus side. I followed her, not thinking about anything at all. Not Martin's problems,

real or imagined. Not Candi's, hell, I'd never even met her. And mercifully, not mine either.

But my good feeling about nothingness left quickly as I was rewarding myself. My mind went back to how my wife, Mal, had begun to weave herself a new life over the past few months. She had always been an independent woman—lusty, even savage on occasion. But not now. That was gone.

Suddenly all I saw was the closeness of that long green car. The girl had braked the car too quickly. I swerved out of control over the curb, missing a fancy mailbox, which seemed to drift by silently, slowly twirling, staying an eternity within the framework of the driver's window. My car stopped facing backward.

I turned my head. The green Jag hadn't stopped.

"Shit!"

No other car was in sight. I pulled the car around, managing not to damage any more lawn than I already had, and gunned it.

I turned the corner, the car straining against the curve. I felt like I was in a German car commercial.

No use. The car was gone.

I slowed down to cruising speed and headed the car toward Buckhead. Martin had told me she liked to do lunch at the Peachtree Cafe, which isn't on Peachtree at all, but an even more fashionable Atlanta street—East Paces Ferry. But it was only one block from the Peachtree-Roswell Road intersection, so legitimately I guess it could claim the name. But everything in Atlanta is close to one Peachtree Street or another. Somebody counted 'em up once—sixty-two—and they haven't quit naming streets.

I'd been following the woman for two weeks. Up till then she'd been the soul of propriety except for the dorks at Peachtree Cafe. The previous week she had led me slowly, almost lovingly down toward Virginia-Highlands, that part of Midtown between

Ponce de Leon the Ponce as the nouveau yups call it) and Highlands Avenue (which for some reason they don't call the Highs).

She pulled in behind Walter Mitty's, a jazz place with diverse clientele. I was on the other side of the darkened parking lot behind the club when she flashed her legs and got out of her car. The light played on the surface and shimmered the color creating a white phosphorescence.

I was mesmerized.

When I looked again, the back entrance of the building was just swinging shut. I didn't bother hurrying. She couldn't hide in the club.

I walked through the upstairs dining area, hearing the low and mumbled 'darlings,' took a seat at the downstairs bar. No luck.

I glanced toward the obvious choice — the ladies room. After two minutes I left the drink, moved as quickly as I dared to the exit. No one seemed to pay me any attention and I drifted toward the hall door. I pushed the door. At the far end of the lot, her car was just making a turn.

As I raced to my car, I was clipped from behind and knocked to the ground. I reached around to grab an ankle of a dark-haired man with bushy hair, forcing him down temporarily with me. But he was a younger guy and in much better shape. He righted himself, pushed my head back to the ground, and kicked me hard in the side.

He seemed to like the feel of that and kicked me again.

I didn't have to pretend that it hurt. I didn't move for a while and soon the sound of his feet walking away dimmed in my ringing ear.

I felt like a dumb rookie. I'd fallen for the oldest scam in the tailing business. Lull 'em into a false sense of security, then beat a hasty retreat.

I drove back to her place just to see if her car was there (it wasn't) then drove myself home.

Mal wasn't there.

The hand on the mantel clock was moving in slow motion.

3.

My ribs reminded me of that little encounter at Walter Mitty's as I glided the BMW toward Buckhead. The green Jag was waiting for me at a red light on Roswell Road. Soon Candace Martin pulled into the valet parking at the Peachtree Cafe. She tossed the keys at the attendant, acting annoyed, like she was late.

She hollered, "Hello, Johnny," and entered the small foyer of the club. She walked past the bar with its glitter of glass, mirrors, and greenery to a pay phone adjacent to the lounge.

She dropped her change in, punched rapidly on the Touch-Tone, tapping her fingers nervously as she waited for the rings. I don't smoke but since the cigarette machine was near the pay phones, I walked over to buy a pack, hoping to catch part of her conversation.

"Hi." Her voice was soft. "It's Candi. I'm at P.C. Doing a lunch with Mark. Yeah. I'll think about that."

She was silent for a while, her face slowly relaxing from the stress of the drive.

"I'll see you soon." The girl giggled. "You're bad," she said, and hung up.

Some swarthy guy with a name tag that said "Andre" escorted her to a table where a handsome dark haired man about twenty-five sat waiting. I was following a quite stunning little blonde—Kimberley, according to a discreet little name tag—to a table close by. It had only cost me ten bucks. I figured it was lucky, I'd hear something worthwhile.

"Mark, darling." He rose to kiss her. She gave him a special hug, held it long and low.

"C'M. I was beginning to worry."

"I left late. Had to hurry. And there was this car. I mean I dunno what it was doing. It spun out behind me, I think. Some loony in too big a hurry." She paused. "He was in a Beamer. It looked like the car that followed me before."

Mark reached across the table, put his hand over hers. He left it there gently. "Honey, I'm sorry. Do you need my help again, like with that guy at Walter Mitty's?"

She squeezed his hand, placed it on her cheek. As she lowered it, her lips lightly touched his fingertips. I ate slowly, picking over my salad, savoring the little crunchy bread that came hidden in a beige tea towel. Only once did I look at the couple, at the face of Martin's fallen beloved.

Halfway through my meal the couple rose from their table. As they left I made a note in my case book.

It all began to make sense. Mark was the one who jumped me. I felt that I was just in on the end of a very old story—one that had been repeated, and would be, many times.

But old stories are best. I kept telling myself. They're so true to form. Middle-aged man, young wife, what'd you expect? More fodder for the zipper patrol.

4.

I eased my car toward her home. I hardly went fast at all, yet I spotted her turning in the drive. Alone. I stuck around for a little more than an hour, saw no more activity than her shades slowly open, then just as slowly close.

I drove up toward Cobb County. No hurry, you understand, just stayed in the right lane on Johnson Ferry all the way from Riverside to Shallowford, then made the mandatory right

I'd been following some lady in a Cadillac for about half the trip. She'd come to a slow stop with all the traffic. When it began to move, she'd miss the flow half a count. She'd been twirling a little curl between her fingers and just wasn't ready for the movement. By the time I got to my turn I was a little annoyed. She turned in front of me onto Shallowford, again going no faster. My mind kept saying, "Damn, bitch," but the lips didn't move. She turned abruptly—no signal—into Walden. I saw her face as I went by. Oblivious.

Hell, I was in no hurry to get home either. Two people and empty dreams. I turned my mind off as I clicked the garage door opener. I waited as it whined. My Pontiac was parked outside until I finished up with Candi.

"Hi," I said as I walked into the kitchen. I went over for the obligatory peck.

"Oh, hello, darling," Mal answered, and placed her hand on the small of my back, just where the hips start. She hadn't touched me for days. It held my interest and I returned a similar hug. My arms went around her and I traced the curve of her ass. She responded by opening her mouth more and pressing her hips into me.

"Ymmm," I said. I'd thought it was only my mind that was horny.

By now she'd moved her hand from my butt and was slowly caressing my groin through my pants. I felt her give as she touched me. She brought her other hand around and began to undo my belt and unzip my pants. She reached inside my boxer shorts, slowly made me ready.

Then she pulled away and stepped out of her skirt. She slipped off those little bikinis she likes to wear, threw them over her shoulder and turned toward the kitchen counter. She leaned forward and arched her hips. All I saw was that wonderful ass. From somewhere her voice called, "Bob, this way. At the counter."

Soon she was signing, "So long so long "

Later, after the moaning, I marveled at the entire thing I couldn't ever remember doing it in the kitchen.

Nice. Warm again.

5.

I decided the only thing left to do with the Candi girl was to get her picture with Mark That lunch was everything. I knew she'd go back She'd obviously thought she'd given me the slip when my car spun out.

The next time would be easier.

I called my client.

"Martin Crawford . Yeah, I think I've got the goods." I nodded to myself.

"Yeah, same old thing I listened as his voice began to show pain.

"Young guy . Does it matter ? Oh okay, Mark something or other. I'll know the last name tonight "

He spoke more deliberately.

"Sure you'll get everything Pictures Names Addresses The works."

I cradled the phone gently, took a deep breath. Luckily I was alone in the house Mal was doing a girls night out with some friend I didn't know named Marsha. After the night before, I was glad to give her the pleasure.

I pulled the BMW out of the garage for the last time. I was beginning to like the damn thing

One final time I pulled up at the Harris Trail address to await the Jag. I expected the usual lull, but almost as soon as I had stopped I saw the headlights coming down the drive Candi turned right toward Buckhead and Midtown, wound the car out.

My mind was fully on the chase. I wasn't usually this carefree. I had no trouble following her down Powers Ferry past the entrance to Chastain Park, where the yups get rained on at the summer concert series and the sophisticated ladies pee in the men's room because the line is just too long at the ladies ("Don't you know?").

She wheeled the Jag to a stop at Roswell Road, acted as if she were going to turn north toward Johnny's Hideaway but instead bore right toward Piedmont.

She was alone and I hoped—for my sake—that she was going to meet Mark. I could get my evidence and get out of Candi's life. I don't like triangle jobs.

The whole affair seemed hazy. Sure, I was following Candi, but she didn't seem to mind that I'd found her lover. There didn't seem to be any challenge to it. It was almost like I didn't deserve to take that jerk Martin's money. Almost.

By now she'd turned left onto Buford Highway. This definitely was not yup territory. I began to feel a little queasy as she turned onto Cheshire Bridge. She was headed toward Vaseline Valley. If Mark was part of that crowd, Martin was better off without Candi. We drove past some of the nightspots on the strip—Weekends, the Texas Drilling Company.

I began to feel a little pity for Martin.

She wheeled into a parking lot beside a tiny club. There was no big sign like the others. I began to feel better. Maybe this was just an out-of-the-way bar which specialized in discretion. The place was named after a flower—the Rose. It looked vaguely Japanese.

I waited in the parking lot for a few minutes.

No use in rushing the inevitable. I rolled down my window and breathed some of the crisp November air. Atlanta at its best. My head soon cleared to the task.

From the glove compartment I pulled my little camera and

checked the film. Without a flash, I decided on ASA 1000 film. It might be grainy, but it'd do.

I moved to the entrance, a small dark alcove, which in turn led to an even darker interior.

I really didn't know what I'd see. In this neighborhood I expected a gay bar but there didn't seem to be any men. A hostess came up to me.

"Can I help you, sir?" The last word had just too much of an edge on it.

"I'm supposed to meet a lady. I'll just wait at the bar."

She flipped her hair over her shoulder and walked away. The sway was too pronounced for my taste.

I moved to the bar, feeling the lump of the camera in my coat pocket. I hadn't really paid much attention to the crowd before. I'd noticed a number of women as I entered but I hadn't thought too much about it. Now, as I looked around from table to table, I didn't see any men at all. Not even a waiter.

The bartender came over. "What can I get you, sweetie?"

I had been looking away. As I turned around I saw a drop dead gorgeous redhead. She was smiling broadly. "And just what brings you here tonight?"

I tried the "I'm meeting someone" story. She laughed.

"Like your makeup," she cooed.

I was beginning to be uncomfortable. I had lost all thought of Miss Candi Martin and her lover Mark. I turned to scan the room. Mark was certainly in for a surprise. It looked like Candi liked to keep everyone guessing.

Through the crowd I heard that distinctive husky laugh. From a dark corner I could see Candi looking directly at me. Her eyes blazed. She was sitting with someone whose back was toward me. She leaned across the table and kissed her companion. Lovingly.

All I could see was the dark hair.

Her flickering smile brought me back to reality. I didn't give a damn if she was here with Mark or anyone else. All I cared about was taking the picture and getting it to Martin. He could worry about all that other shit, it wasn't my affair.

I took my little camera from my pocket and maneuvered it so that I'd have it ready.

I walked toward Candi. She knew my face. By now I knew I hadn't fooled her, that she'd led me here. I was tired of Candi, just as the taste of her was no longer sweet for the software mogul, I'd had my fill of the misnamed woman.

I was glad it was all over. I moved in with the camera.

I stopped close enough to frame both Candi and her companion. Candi saw me waiting, her eyes defiant. The eyes of her companion bore in on me.

"You're the loony in the BMW. My husband sent you, I assume."

"Yeah. Something like that."

"You've been following me for weeks. Well, go ahead, take your damn picture. This'll give that fat bastard something to think about!"

Quickly I took Martin's picture, turned and walked toward the door. I felt cheapened, unclean, my legs were heavy and I braced on a pillar near the bar, breathing deeply.

Someone bumped into me as I stood there. I automatically looked at her face as she turned around. I stopped breathing.

The woman blanched, forcing an unnatural smile to her face, that face I knew so well.

Mal's face.

The dream spoke. "Life's not sweet, Bob."

I only had a second to make it work for me. I steeled myself as I walked past her and the little slit holding tightly onto her arm.

"Neither are you."

I pushed past the loving couple riveting my eyes on the exit I made it without looking back

Outside the bar as the coolness restored my feeling, I stood under the light of a brilliant moon Soon that moon would show harvest orange time to offer thanksgiving for all life's blessings. In that tangible air, reality rushed me Just a few days ago, I had been happier than in years My mind focused on what I'd thought were Mal's passionate words of love I'd thought she was being erotic, that she'd melted to me once again But her "so long" was only an ironic kiss off Her betrayal stung my soul, left me—in that crisp November night—chilled and overcome to the bone.

LIE BESIDE ME

Max Allan Collins and Matthew V. Clemens

John Sand could scarcely believe the unpleasant sensation he was enduring—even though all the evidence at hand and every fiber of his being seemed to resonate with its truth. He had suffered at the hands of the most experienced practitioners of pain—from bamboo shoots to laser beams—all applied in extremely unpleasant places—but nothing could compare to this singular agony.

Here he was, just past his fortieth birthday, hair still black with barely a whisper of gray at the temples, muscles toned from a life of physical activity, a young man by any reasonable standards—a vital man. And yet, only two years removed from MI6, he found himself, for the first time in a remarkably active, frequently precarious life, experiencing a sensation surely common to the average man—a category to which he most certainly did not belong—but which he would be damned if he'd abide.

Sand—who had traded his license to kill for a marriage license—was bored.

There could be no other word for it. He didn't want to be suffused with such a sorry state of mind, and until this moment he supposed he never had been. Nevertheless, there it lay at the core of his being, like a fat, lounging cat, too ennui-ridden even to bother purring: boredom.

Her auburn hair tied in a loose ponytail hanging nearly halfway down her spine, his wife, Traci, slipped through the sliding glass doors out onto the patio of their rambling ranch-style

desert home where Sand sat nursing his vodka martini. The sun was low and throwing cool blue shadows, banishing the dry Texas wind of another hot listless day. Barely six feet away, the swimming pool beckoned, sunlight dancing on its shimmering blue skin—perhaps a quick, bracing dive would wake him from his apathy, if only he had the energy to climb out of the deck chair. Sand felt the pool's pull evaporate as his bikini-clad wife drew his attention to her.

Almost a foot shorter than Sand's six three, Traci's 110 pound curvaceous frame made the skimpy red bathing suit seem even more insubstantial as the firm yet supple shelf of her bosom threatened to spill out with each step she took. He knew what she wanted, and he also knew that his current mind set left him unprepared to meet that need.

"A pound for your thoughts," she said as she eased her nearly naked body onto his lap.

Sand grinned at her lazily. "A penny will do. I'm an American now, you know—by marriage." Then, striking without warning—which was, after all, his way—Sand pulled her down onto his lap and embraced her. She smelled of peach soap, an enticing scent to which he was partial, as she well knew. Yet it wasn't working and only served to help Sand feel more like he was at fault.

"In for a penny," she said, one hand playing with his hair, "in for a pound."

"You'd be overpaying, darling. You still don't understand British currency, do you?"

"I don't have to." A playful smile edged into the corners of her mouth, tiny white teeth flashed—as perfect as a Pepsodent commercial, yet exquisitely feral.

"And why is that?"

Pulling back from him, Traci said, "Two reasons. One: I'm filthy rich—I've got to love my late daddy's oil money."

Sand returned her smile but said nothing.

And two, I'm married to you. I'll leave it to my husband to deal with that silly British Monopoly moola.'

He laughed at that and gave his wife a long, deep kiss. Sitting sideways on his lap, Traci undid her bikini top and dropped it to the cement, then her hands began to move through his hair, her breasts, soft but firm, pushing against his chest as she shifted toward him. He could sense her need for him heightening.

She rubbed against him, shifting, almost squirming, as if trying to absorb him through her skin. The perfect valentine of her bottom seemed to be trying to polish his lap—yet no Cupid's arrow availed itself. Finally, unable to manage either the woman in his lap or his own frustration, Sand let the glass slip from his hand. As it shattered, a small spray of vodka spattered his pant leg.

A giggle welled up, then burst from Traci as she pulled her lips away from Sand's. 'Finished your cocktail?'

"Bottoms up," he said.

Rising, his wife still in his arms, Sand smiled at Traci as he carried her to the edge of the pool.

As she realized what he was about to do, Traci wrestled fruitlessly to free herself from his grasp. 'John,' she shrieked. "You wouldn't. I just did my hair, please, honey, I—."

Without a word, Sand dropped her unceremoniously into the pool. Her backside slapped the water and the water slapped back, making a huge splash. She sank, rose, and broke the water flapping, yelling, 'Goddamn you, John Sand, I never—.'

'Oh, but you have—and frequently,' he said with a hearty laugh that seemed a balm to her anger.

Traci's crystal-shattering laugh joined her husband's booming one, and she watched from the pool as he cleaned up the mess, then brought them each a fresh drink.

Soon he was stripping off his wet pants and white shirt, to join her at the pool. Naked, he sat on the edge of the shallow end

as she stood nearby, water at her narrow waist, her breasts boldly white where the bikini top had shielded them from the sun, copper nipples perked by the cold water. With a casualness that was perhaps too studied, both husband and wife sipped their trademark cocktails.

For Sand, this meant a vodka martini, which was yet another clue that a certain British novelist had nicked the former secret agent's life as the basis for a series of best-selling spy novels, although that "shaken not stirred" business seemed bloody stupid to Sand.

And for Traci, her specialty was bourbon with a single cube of ice, a concoction she'd dubbed the Titanic. When quizzed on the designation, Traci had looked dreamily at the glass and said, "All that bliss and a damned iceberg."

Traci moved languidly through the glimmering water, then leaned closer, her breasts pushing warmly against his legs even in the chilly pool. "You care to tell me what's been troubling you so much lately?"

"It's nothing."

"Is it me?"

"Don't be foolish." Sand gazed into her deep green eyes, then he had to look away—they were too probing.

Letting her free hand wrap around his back, she said, "We made a promise not to lie to each other."

"I'm not lying," he lied.

She shook her head. "Your lies may have fooled villains world 'round, my darlin'," she said, allowing her Texas accent to assert itself, "but to me, you're this transparent." She was waving the cocktail glass in his face, the cube rattling around, a gesture that was teasing but not unkind. "I want to know why it is every time I come near you lately, you find an excuse to not make love to me."

Sand still could not meet her gaze. "That's not true."

"Ah but it is When was the last time we what s that quaint limey term? Shagged?"

He shrugged

She touched him ightly on the tip of his nose with a finger tip "Too damned ong ago, that s for sure "

With a curt nod, Traci set her glass on the edge of the pool climbed the short ladder and disappeared drippingly into the house.

Sand knew he should go after her, at least call her name, but his pride or some damn thing kept him frozen there at the pool s edge, and she hadn't seemed angry, exactly perhaps a .ttle hurt He just sat there egs dangling in the pool, like a splashing child, he wondered how they had come to such a wretched state of affairs.

Hadn t he survived the best efforts of both the Japanese and the Nazis to do him in? And in fifteen years of spying, after the end of the war, hadn t he escaped assass.ns, riva. secret agents and threats too numerous to list, much less remember? How was it that suddenly his own wife petrified him to the core? Although lately the most important part of him hadn t been petrified at all . . .

Even bored John Sand was a man of action however know- ing he had to do something, he climbed out of the pool and strode naked into the house to talk to Traci

Moving from room to room, Sand called her name but found no sign of her Had she been angrier than he thought? Had she left him? He ran to the garage but found her little Austin-Healey convertible still parked there beside the Bentley Retrac ing his steps, he slowly searched the house, and as he stepped into the guest bedroom he glanced at the mirror on the bath- room door Inside the bathroom, he saw the back of a woman in a white bikini, starkly so against her dark tan, long tawny blond

hair trailing down her back, a knife handle protruding from the back of her fist.

Sand's heart leaped into his throat.

He hadn't seen this dimpled backside since his very first mission, but he'd never forget Greta "Honey" Bunsch, the lovely paid assassin who had very nearly done him in. Questions flew through his mind—who sent her? how had she gotten in?—but no time for answering them presented itself. Greta Bunsch, Honey herself, as deadly a villain as she was a beautiful woman, apparently had Tracy trapped in the tub and was about to deliver the fatal blow.

Sand leaped, grabbing the woman around the waist, yanking her back. She gasped in surprise and pain as he dragged her rudely out of the bathroom, hauling her like a rolled-up carpet. Though he'd tried to see into the tub, he could not, his view blocked by Honey Bunsch herself. They wrestled—she'd always been an athletic wench, strong as most men—falling onto the bed, Sand on top, Honey putting up a good fight, her arm with the knife in hand extended out, as if she were trying to get an angle to thrust it into his back, but Sand had a lock on her wrist and kept the knife pointed away from him. Despite her strength, he soon gained the advantage and began to turn the knife toward its owner.

She loosened her grip on the blade, submitting, her body beneath him, too, ceasing its wriggling. Surprised, Sand looked into her face, obscured by tawny hair, and swept it away from beautiful features—

—and realized he'd very nearly stabbed Tracy.

"What the hell, Tracy? What are you doing wearing that wig?"

Her smile stunned him even more. "I thought I'd add a little spice to our love life—by dressing up as one of your old flames."

Sand pushed away from her, his mouth hanging open.

She nodded toward his erection. "I'd say my plan worked out just fine."

He flopped onto his back, next to her, staring up at the ceiling, breathing hard. "I— I could have killed you."

She lay on her side beside him, taking his throbbing member in her delicate hand, squeezing gently. "It does look dangerous . . . but I doubt it's deadly."

"The knife, I mean!"

She shook her fake blond locks. "Oh, we couldn't have that! That would have wrecked my plan."

Shaking his head, he asked, "Where did that outfit come from?"

Grinning with those tiny white teeth, Traci said, "I've had it for a while. I saw the photographs of the infamous Ms. Bunsch, in that *Life* article—I knew what that Teutonic twat looked like. I was just saving it for the right occasion. You found me before I was completely ready—it was supposed to be a surprise."

"That it was," he said. "That it was. Christ, she's still at large, you know. This is no joke."

His wife was stroking him, pleased at what she saw—and held. "No—no it isn't." With her free hand, Traci ran her fingers through the long hair of the wig. "How do you like me as a blonde?"

Unable to find any words, Sand merely nodded his approval.

Traci's grin widened as she released his erection and sat like an Indian beside him, sliding the skimpy straps down her arms, exposing her breasts to him, their full, quivering ripeness, nipples the size of sand dollars, the tips erect. "Tell me, darlin', do you think blondes really have more fun?"

Sand swept her into his arms. His mouth pressed to hers in a passionate kiss, his tongue exploring her mouth. His hands found her breasts first, followed quickly by his mouth as his hands tugged away her bikini bottoms.

As her husband devoured her, Traci moaned, her left hand around his neck, her right finding him and pumping slowly. Easing her hand away, Sand showered her belly with kisses as he moved off the bed. On his knees at the foot of the bed, Sand yanked Traci toward him, his tongue leaping into her wet center.

Writhing, pulling his hair as she held his head in place, Traci screamed in wonderful agony, ecstasy engulfing her, once, twice, and finally a third time before Sand let her up to catch her breath.

"Jesus," she said between gasps. "You sure are makin up for lost time, darlin'..."

He stood and she rolled over flat on her belly—as flat as those breasts would allow—and took him into her mouth, just the tip at first, pausing to tell him how good he tasted, before sliding down his shaft, taking more of him into her mouth, her throat, until he could feel her cute turned up nose tickling his stomach.

She looked up at him, licking her lips, kicking her legs like a gleeful kid, the perfect globes of her ass forming that wonderful valentine, awaiting its arrow. "More?" she asked, tongue in one corner of her mouth.

But he turned the question around on her, saying "Much more," a Cheshire cat grin crossing his face as he turned her onto her back and crawled around and climbed on her. His mouth found her taut nipples—the round areolas turned oblong when excited—then he slipped down between her legs again, where his lips kissed hers, and as she started to come again, he entered her.

She moaned and shuddered and wrapped her arms around him, tight, her fingernails digging into his back, her teeth nipping at his shoulder as she encircled him with her legs and bucked against him until, with a great shiver, they each climaxed, then collapsed in a heap and, soon, slept.

When Sand finally opened his eyes, the guest room was shrouded in darkness.

Traci was gone.

For a moment, he lay there wondering what the hell had happened—he felt like something his wife had rolled over, however nicely. Evidently he wasn't quite as bored as he'd thought. And chances were that Traci would never let him be. That made him smile, and he was still smiling when he heard the soft metallic rattle at the door.

He could see her outline in the light from the hallway. As she strolled confidently into the room, backlighting allowed Sand to see that she wore a black leather outfit complete with stiletto heels and a headpiece that contained openings for eyes, nostrils, and mouth. As she came closer, he realized the rattle he'd heard had been handcuffs, which dangled from her left hand—several pairs of them!

So the role play was not over—not that he minded. She was mimicking the deadly, delirious Sadie Marquis, the albino Basque assassin that his nemesis Jake Lonestarr had sent to kill him back in '61, three years ago.

As her name implied, Sadie was a graduate of the Marquis de Sade school of lovemaking—an honor student. He still had the scars from the steaming-hot candle wax to prove it. A little mild S&M play might be fun, though his wife could hardly hope to compete with Sadie's expertise in pleasurable pain . . . or was that painful pleasure?

"Well . . . Sadie. Striking ensemble, ever the dominating personality."

Traci said nothing, answering only with a tight smile as she handcuffed his right wrist to the brass headboard.

With his eyes finally beginning to adjust to the soft lighting, Sand saw the pink tips of nipples protruding from small holes in the front of the leather suit. He nipped playfully at one as it

moved past but Traci put a hand on his chest and just shook her head Taking the hint Sand lay back as she produced a second pair of handcuffs from somewhere and cuffed his left wrist to the headboard as well Then his feet were bound to the footboard and Sand licked his lips in anticipation of what would come next. At the foot of the bed his captor ran a stray leather-gloved finger over his bare leg, then allowed it to find its way to one of her exposed nipples She rubbed against it as if trying to massage his warmth into her body Then, slowly she let the hand trail up to the zipper at the back of the hood

"What do you have in mind for act two?" Sand asked.

Unzipping the hood, she let it fall away. When Sand didn't see the cascade of Traci's auburn hair but instead a close cropped white cap of hair, he squinted in the dim light and saw the strange, lovely pink eyes of the real Sadie Marquis

"You!"

She smiled sublimely down at him, her mouth a pretty pink line "For act two, Mr Sand? I will kill you of course Ah, but slowly exquisitely your final orgasm and your final breath will be one."

Forgetting his predicament for a moment, Sand tried to throw himself at her, but his bonds held tight and finally, in exasperation, he stopped "What have you done with my wife?

A cagey grin crossed the alabaster face, the lovely rat's eyes glimmered "I prefer to torture you by leaving that question unanswered Let's just say she's unable to interrupt us "

"You heartless bitch Sand yanked at his bonds, metal cutting his flesh "If you've harmed her in any way, I'll "

Sadie lashed out with her gloved right hand, catching his cheek The slap cracked like a gunshot in the small room "You'll do nothing, Sand, unless I tell you to "

The warm taste of blood flooded Sand's mouth. Turning his head, he spit it onto the pillow next to him

"Here's how I'll kil. you, you miserable bitch,' he said to her 'Fast—and the only pleasure will be mine '

Her pinkish pretty-rodent eves glared down at him. She dipped her fingertip into the pool of blood and spittle on the pillow then licked it from her finger and let out a sigh of contentment "I simply adore the taste of blood, Sand—especially yours "

Holding her gaze, and despite his revulsion, Sand kept his voice calm. "Where is my wife?"

"My darling Sand, while it is true you have many problems ' Her voice trailed off as a six inch stiletto appeared in her hand She ran the point of the blade down his chest, leaving a small white indentation in his skin as it traveled toward his groin . your wife is no longer one of them

A growl of pure hatred boiled up from within him as Sand tried again to launch himself at his captor

This time she just laughed at him

You are a dead woman, he said coldly, despite the heat of his rage. "So bloody dead . . "

Tapping the blade against the tent pole beneath the sheets, just below his waist she said, 'Such strong words—but revenge doesn't seem to be what you really have on your mind

Sand tried to will his erection away, but that only seemed to make the problem more prominent

"How I'm going to enjoy this . I've owed you this for a long, long time, darling Sand . . '

As the knife arced down toward his face, Sand froze, welcoming a death that would reunite him with Traci He didn't want life without her and he wondered how he could ever have allowed boredom to come into their lives for even a moment As the blade rushed toward him, he focused on the point, willing it to do its job quickly At the last second, the knife swerved past his skull and Sadie jammed it just above Sand's head, into the wall, where the blade quivered.

Her laughter pealed through the room as she looked down at Sand. "I told you very slowly, Sand, very slowly. And not before I've had my fun. My orders are to kill you, but how is *my* business."

He said nothing as she leisurely unzipped the leather suit and stepped out of it. Her white skin offered a striking contrast to the black leather as she tossed the suit aside and moved closer to him. Her body was leaner than Traci's, her breasts somewhat smaller, but it was a body as beautiful as its owner was evil, pale flesh interrupted only by nipples as pink as her eyes and the wispy platinum of her pubic triangle.

"This, too," she whispered as she drew near enough for him to feel her warm breath against his face, "I have waited a long time for."

Avoiding his thrashing head, Sadie explored his chest and stomach with her hands and tongue.

Strangely, as repelled as he was, some physical, animal part of him remained drawn enough to her shapely form for that damned erection—where had it been when he needed it?—to stand firm.

"Wouldn't it be just . . . delicious . . . to be kissed in that most private of ways," she said, lowering her lips above his pulsing member, wondering when sharp teeth might bite? Might even—shall we say—dismember? How long would it take you to bleed to death, I wonder?"

Her lips hovered above the tip of him when Sand heard a sound from the door, a throat clearing.

Sadie's head whirled away from his erection, toward the back-lighted doorway.

There—nude as a grape, blood trickling from a cut on her forehead, a set of handcuffs dangling from her left wrist—stood Traci.

She glared at the albino killer, who was kneeling on the bed, poised above Sand's erection. "Excuse me," Traci said. "I believe that's my job."

Pink eyes gleaming in the dim light, Sadie snarled at her escaped prisoner, just as Traci leaped at her. The two women landed in a tangle on the bed between Sand's bound legs, and for just a second the thought struck him that of all the scenarios he'd ever conceived for his demise, having it come while in bed with two naked women would normally have been near the top.

Not tonight.

The two women scratched, clawed, and pulled at each other's hair, neither gaining a clear advantage until Traci hammered home a solid right that caught Sadie on the point of the jaw and sent her flailing off the bed.

Traci glanced down at Sand, nodding toward his erection. "You've got some explaining to do, mister."

"Me?" Sand asked. "I didn't invite her. I hate ménages à trois!"

Sadie got to her feet and lunged across Sand for the knife still embedded in the wall. Traci understood the assassin's goal a split second too late, ending up behind Sadie, wrapping her arms around the killer's chest, her hands glued to Sadie's bare breasts, nipples popping pinkly through Traci's fingers.

Both women on top of him, the handcuffed Sand, his voice innocent, said, "We'll talk about it later, dear. I see you have your hands full just now."

Sadie strained, her fingers just a fraction short of the knife handle. Still, Traci found time to toss a glare at Sand for his smart remark, though he knew it would spur her on. Then, just as Sadie touched the handle, Sand shifted his weight, tossing both women off balance.

Traci lost her grip on the killer and Sadie grabbed the knife, yanking it free from the wall just as Traci regained her balance. Sadie swung around, trying to stab Traci with a backhand motion.

Ready for her husband's bucking this time, Traci blocked the

thrust with her forearm and plucked the knife from Sadie's hand as the killer went flipping off the bed, over the footboard.

As Sadie—framed in the doorway—got to her feet ready for another assault, Traci hurled the knife end over end, the blade disappearing completely into Sadie's abdomen. The killer grunted, then looked down, surprised to see the knife protruding from her albino belly, a faint trickle of red sliding down to mingle with her white pubic hair.

"It . . . it hurts," the killer burbled.

"Enjoy," Sand said.

Even as Sadie painfully pulled the blade from her stomach, Sand glanced toward the night table. Not needing any more prodding than that, Traci lurched to the drawer, yanked it open, and withdrew Sand's Walther PPK.

Sadie raised the blade over her head as blood gushed from her now open wound. Traci planted her feet—she'd been shooting since childhood, Texas girl that she was—and squeezed off two shots, the first ripping through Sadie's right shoulder, spinning her around so the second bullet caught her in the middle of the back and sent her tumbling out into the hallway, where she sprawled in a lifeless heap of pale flesh.

Traci crossed the room and went out to check the body, to make sure the killer was dead.

Satisfied, she reentered the bedroom, turning her attention to her trussed-up husband. "Would you like to explain that?"

"I—I thought she was you. More of this fantasy routine. Then she—"

"Oh, John, really, she doesn't look a thing like me."

"Yes, well, that's true, but she was wearing that." He tossed his head toward the leather suit on the floor.

Fists on her hips, like Wonder Woman, only naked, Traci smirked down at her bound husband. "So you let her handcuff you to the bed?"

Sand smiled sheepishly "It seemed like the thing to do, at the time . And where were you, anyway?"

She gestured with her head and the auburn hair flounced. "I d gone to use the shower in our bedroom, I didn t want to disturb you. That witch jumped me hit me in the head with something, then handcuffed me to the pipe under the sink."

He smiled proud of her And you took the plumbing apart to escape."

Traci nodded 'Made a hell of a mess on the floor but nothing like this."

'I presume the keys for these things are in that suit,' Sand said, nodding toward the discarded, exotic garment as he rattled the cuffs.

She ignored him and sat on the edge of the bed leaning over him, her dangling hair nearly touching his face "I m not sure I want to let you go just yet Maybe I wanna brand you, like a steer . . ."

Sand tried to look serious. 'For God's sake Traci, there s a dead body out in the hall!"

Traci thought about that for a moment, then she went over and slammed the door on the corpse

"Screw her, she said Then her expression darkened —or pretended to She pointed at her husband 'No, John Sand —screw you!"

And she did.

Several times during none of which could he think of any other woman.

MIRROR, MIRROR

Catherine Dain

Dazzled. She was dazzled. As if she had never seen her image in a mirror before. The richness of the flesh tones, mostly a golden tan, except for the white semicircles broken by dark pink dots that were her breasts and a white triangle broken by a smaller black one diving between her thighs. She reached up with golden hands to press the deep pink nipples against her white breasts.

She had beautiful breasts. She had never quite realized that before, never seen them quite this way. The glow from the bed side lamp reflecting upward made her think of Rembrandt. High lights, shadows. The chiaroscuro of flesh and sheet. Her dark hair against the pillow, her eyes barely open, slitted just enough that she could watch herself in the mirror.

Rubens would have wanted to paint her, but he would have made her rounder. And Modigliani. But he would have flattened her. Goya would have shed too much light on her. She liked the shadows. She liked moving, slightly, not much, barely knowing that she moved, watching her image change through slitted eyes.

Someone was at the periphery of her vision. As she slid her eyes from the overhead mirror to the naked man entering the room, she had to think, trying to remember who he was. Some thing made her think he was sweaty, although she couldn't see moisture and she couldn't smell him.

His skin was shiny white, reminding her of pearls. He was slender except for a slightly rounded belly. His muscles lacked

definition. As if he dieted but didn't exercise. Like an accountant, she thought, almost giggling. Naked, he looked like an accountant. Except for his hair. His hair was full and gray, little wires shooting off in all directions. His hair looked as if his brain had gone on overload and electrified it. The same gray hair, touched with reddish brown, bushed around his limp white cock.

He shoved an emerald bottle into the silver ice bucket on the table next to the bed.

"I brought us another bottle of champagne," he said, twisting it in the slush.

She nodded to her reflection in the mirror, which nodded in synchrony.

What was she doing here?

The phone behind the ice bucket rang.

"Shit," the man muttered.

The phone rang again. After the third ring, the answering machine clicked on. He stared at it while the message played, waiting to hear the caller's voice.

"Yeah, Tom, it's Manny," came the voice from the speaker. "Call me as soon as—"

"Yeah, Manny," the man growled, grabbing the receiver. "What the hell is this? It's fucking two A.M. where you are."

He sat down on the ivory sheets and swung his legs up, plumping the oversize pillow behind him with his free hand. Manny was excited about something, she could hear that.

"No, listen," the man interrupted. "It's not right. In fact, it's a piece of shit. We gotta give them the feeling that this show is going to be different, and the jingle is the way we do that."

He poured a glass of champagne, handed it to her silently and poured one for himself.

She propped herself slightly on a pillow, so that she could sip her drink and study the reflected drink overhead. The cham-

pagne was amber darker than the sheets, darker than her white breasts, lighter than her tan

Soon she thought Soon she would come down, just enough to get dressed and drive herself home

Had she driven? Was her car outside the house?

'Goddammit, Manny listen to me ' the man said again interrupting Manny's plea "I gotta take this to *my* boss. I know what Bert wants, it's my job to know what Bert wants He wanted a tune people will hum and he's got that Now he wants lyrics that give people a special feeling about this show, that make them want to tune in be part of it

She took another sip of the champagne The bubbles were sharp in her nose The champagne was too dry almost tart, astringent in her mouth Good If it had been sweeter, she would have dissolved into it The dryness was helping her concentrate

She heard Manny chirping in the background of her mind

It was the smoke, that was it She'd only had a couple of hits, but Jesus, was that stuff strong How could he talk on the phone?

'Nobody's asking you to be Sondheim Manny But what you got wouldn't sell new, improved Tide

Why was she in bed with him? Had there been a moment when she had found him attractive? There must have been a moment.

She had a flash of him fully clothed, standing in front of a desk She focused on the flash, vibrating like a strobe in her mind, made it stand still She was seated behind the desk, looking at his Rodeo Drive sport jacket, slacks carelessly worn The man was in a hurry, wanting his messages, messages she had collected for two days, not knowing who he was, what he looked like

He had snapped his name at her strutting a bit pleased at her embarrassment He had stopped her from letting go of the pink slips of paper first with his hand, then with his eyes His hand had felt bony and authoritative where it grasped hers

Make a reservation for dinner for two. Eight o'clock. Les Etoiles."

He strode away before she could respond.

She had made the reservation, not connecting it with herself, not realizing that was the way he was inviting her to dinner.

Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the fairest of them all? No, that wasn't right. *Mirror, mirror, on the ceiling*—what rhymed with ceiling?

She hadn't seen him again until he burst from his office and returned to her desk a little before five. Various people had swept past her in the meantime, straight to Celia, the secretary who guarded the inner door. Some had been admitted, some sent away.

At one thirty sandwiches were delivered for the man and two others. She was going to take them in, but Celia had stopped her. A jealous woman, she had thought, looking at the short gray hair, the brown silk blouse open to her cleavage, as if a woman her age might still be attractive. An office wife who had to take the sandwiches in herself.

She had seen his office, on the first day the temp agency sent her. She had slipped in to look while Celia was out. The desk, really more like a large ornate mahogany table with a tall leather chair behind it, was clear of everything except a computer with a dust cover. A grayish brown haze obscured whatever view the windows normally offered. She wondered if the office was high enough to see all the way to the ocean on a smogless day.

The real work was evidently done in another part of the room. A low table in front of a heavy leather sofa was piled with papers. The table was flanked by two more tall leather chairs. She had fantasies of deals made in that room, Nielsen ratings studied, careers made or broken.

She was back at the front desk before Celia caught her. She stayed at the desk for two more days.

Jesus, I almost forgot," he had said as he appeared at her desk just as she was getting ready to leave. "You don't know where I live."

He gave her quick directions to a house in the hills above the Strip—on one of the bird streets—and a telephone number. Behind him Celia had glared like a Gorgon.

"I'll meet you there at seven. We can have a drink before dinner," he had said. "If I'm late, just sit on the porch."

She had nodded, not knowing what else to do, as he whirled back to his meeting, pulling the office door shut behind him. She had a glimpse of oily sandwich wrappers on the low table.

That was the moment when he had seemed attractive. That was the moment she remembered as she sat on his front porch for almost an hour before his Jaguar screeched into the driveway.

"Come on, let's go," he yelled out the car window.

He lit a joint as she got into the car.

He lit another one as he listened to Manny beg. He took a hit and handed it to her.

She watched herself raise the joint to her full lips, saw the end of the joint glow. She handed it back.

"Manny, you're wasting my time. Feeling, Manny, feeling. You either have it by tomorrow morning or I get somebody who can give it to me."

He had talked a lot at dinner. She had hoped he would confide something about the deals being made in his office, but he hadn't. Or if he had, she hadn't heard it. The restaurant was noisy and crowded, and she had missed some of what he'd said. People kept coming up and talking to him. One, an actor she recognized, wanted something. They left the table together for a few minutes.

When he came back, he didn't seem hungry. She would have eaten more, but he was edgy and ready to go.

She would have told him about her art classes, asked his ad-

vice about finding full-time work, if he had given her an opening. He seemed to think she was a wanna be actress, and she didn't have an opportunity to tell him he was mistaken.

When they got back to his house, he had assumed she was coming in, and somehow she had followed, still thinking she might be able to talk. But then there was a bottle of champagne and some coke and another joint, and she wasn't certain quite how, but she ended up in bed with him.

Her stomach churned thinking about his small, insistent cock. She took another sip of champagne. That was better.

The receiver clicked into place.

"Jesus, that guy is dumb."

The man reached into the drawer of the nightstand for a small glass vial and a tiny spoon. He snorted some white powder into each nostril and offered her the same.

Her head cleared a little.

"Listen," he said, very close to her ear. She could see the white hand on her stomach, making her skin cold, see how close his mouth was to her ear. She connected that with a sour smell that invaded her nose and pushed past the tang of cocaine. "I know I was a little fast for you earlier. I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you now."

The white hand came up to the glass of champagne, as if he wanted to take it away from her.

She tried to tell him no, tried to get the word out, but all she could do was groan. Then she managed to start shaking her head, no. Fast. She shook her head fast, as fast as she could without spilling her champagne.

"Something wrong?"

She was still struggling for words when he pulled away from her. There was a noise somewhere, an insistent ringing, not the phone.

"Damn! First the phone, now the front door." He grabbed a

shimmery red robe from somewhere and put it on. "I'll be back in a minute."

She relaxed and took another sip of the champagne. The glass was almost empty, so she drank the rest. She couldn't figure out what to do with it, so she laid the crystal flute carefully next to her golden thigh.

At first there was silence, but then the sounds of an argument drifted into the room.

"How the hell do you expect me to come up with the money at this time of night?" the man said, his voice sharp with anger.

She didn't hear the response.

"I told him I'd have it for him Monday," the man said. "And I'll have it. Look, I'm a little overextended right now, he knows that. I don't have the cash, but I can get it by Monday. He'll have to wait until then. Otherwise the best I can do is a postdated check."

Someone thought that was funny.

"I've got a network deal on this one," the man continued. "The lawyers were in my office all day today working out details. It's good as gold, and I'll be able to borrow against it."

"Well, that's the thing." Another man's voice, this one deeper, calmer. "We heard the deal went south. We heard the network money isn't going to be there to bail you out."

"What?" Now the man was more frightened than angry. "I swear, I got a deal. Who told you I don't?"

"Somebody inside your office. Somebody heard, gave us a call," the soft voice said.

She liked the sound of the soft, deep voice. She especially liked that he was keeping the man busy, keeping him away, so that she could look at her golden body in the mirror.

"Jesus." The man sounded a little sick. "Celia called you. I should have known that bitch would find a way to get even with me. I should have fired her when I stopped fucking her. Listen,

she's lying. She's lying because she wants to hurt me. You can't believe her. You gotta give me a chance here.

"Well, the boss figures he's given you enough chances. He was thinking about making an example out of you even before he got word you were just stringing him along. Besides, he doesn't like you." The deep voice was so calm, so peaceful.

"All right. I need to talk to him directly. Call him up, get him on the phone, let me explain," the man said.

"He's through talking. He sent us," the soft voice said.

"I'm a good customer. You don't want to kill me over some lie, some fucking mistake." The man sounded angry again, stronger.

"You're a fucking lying addict, and you're the one who made the mistake." This time the deep voice had an edge to it.

"What are you doing?"

There was no answer.

And then the man screamed—a short, sharp scream that would have roused her if she hadn't been so stoned, and if it hadn't subsided so quickly, become nothing more than a sob.

"What was that?" he asked, his voice slurring.

"You just overdosed," the soft voice replied. "Happens all the time to people like you. Be grateful it's an easy death. We could have done it differently, except the boss wanted it to look like an accident to anybody who didn't know."

"What do we do now?" That was another voice, younger, one she hadn't heard before.

"Put him to bed. Make sure his fingerprints are on the needle. Then we leave."

She could hear them coming toward the room, then she glimpsed them in the doorway, two men half carrying a third in a shimmery red bathrobe.

"Shit," the younger voice said. "There's somebody here."

They dumped the man onto the bed next to her.

She turned her head and her eyes met dark brown ones, large, sad eyes that glistened in the dim light.

'She's just a kid, and she's practically a zombie," the mouth beneath the eyes said. 'A zombie with a gorgeous body. What do you think she was doing in bed with that asshole?'

'Probably wanted free dope. Didn't realize what it was going to cost her," the deep voice said.

She didn't see the man with the deep voice because she was still looking at the dark eyes.

'She won't be able to talk," the mouth beneath them said. 'Can we just grab her things and get her out of here?"

'No," the soft, deep voice answered. 'She'll have to stay. Good thing we brought enough for two."

"Damn."

The man with the sad eyes moved around to her side of the bed. A moment later he picked up her arm.

Something sharp jabbed her, something flew up her vein like fire. Her eyes opened wide.

Mirror, mirror, overhead . . .

A DICK AND JANE STORY

Jack Kelly

The dog was Spot. Can you believe it? Of course a guy named Dick marries a girl named Jane, what are they going to call their dog, Rin Tin Tin? The whole story could have come right out of a first-grade reader. Run, Spot, run.

"To hell with Spot," I said.

They lived down the road from us, in the trailer Dick had left Jane with twins and Spot kept her from going baby talk mad, she'd told my wife.

It all started during *Monday Night Football*. Whenever our Bills are playing the Giants, it's deja vu: the Super Bowl they dropped, the last second field goal they missed. Somebody said the tragedy of life is not that man loses, but that he almost wins. Tell me about it.

The Bills were off to a rocky start that year as per usual, and they needed to beat the Giants to get on track. It was an important game; forget about my fifty bucks riding on their shaky secondary. They were trailing by six coming up to the half, but I was clinging to hope. All they had to do: get their running game going and . . .

Anyway, Jane storms in, a twin in each arm, frantic. Spot's run off. Jane's wigging. Our girls start fussing over the babies. The wife reads my look, takes me into the dining room for a talk.

Jane, the way she drove a car, you wouldn't want her behind the wheel when she was upset; that was one. Besides, how could we send her out alone? I should take her around, the wife

said, cruise the back roads, help her find Spot. It was a favor you couldn't say no to, not at that point in Jane's life.

'She's needy,' the wife tells me.

So the Bills are third and long and I'm heading out the door to look for a lost dog. Jane climbs in beside me, her face streaked with tears, hair all over the place.

Spot was not a dog to run. He was a little rug-colored terrier who never chased deer. He used to bite at the tires of cars, but Dick cured him of that, a blast of lemon juice in the eyes. Spot was the Matt Dillon of his miniature Dodge City, so when he took off, Jane assumed the worst. I figured the dog preferred the call of the wild to a hysterical woman and two rug rats. Jane's voice can bend in a way, when she's keyed up, that's like a nail coming out of old oak. Shut the hell up, Jane, you feel like saying, I suppose Dick did say it.

She shined a flashlight on the shoulder of the road and into ditches. 'Spot!' she called. Sometimes she made it two syllables, 'Spo-ot!' I had to start yelling 'Spot, Spot!' myself, just to drown her out.

I didn't know Jane well. She was just the big-hipped woman down the road that I tooted at when I saw her out raking leaves. She wore braids and jeans and work shirts. You know the type: pottery classes and organic gardening.

That night we cruised up and down the dark roads. Now and then I stopped and turned off the engine. We sat and listened while the cool autumn night seeped in through the car windows. Jane's face by the dashboard lights, her eyes gleaming, moved me. She was younger than I had imagined, sweet-looking, with lovely lips.

Down at the intersection with the state highway, neon beer signs lit up a roadhouse called the Loadstone Bar. Jane asked me to stop—somebody there might have seen Spot. It was a redneck hangout, very dark inside, a place I never would have taken the

wife Jane talked to the bartender and to a couple of guys drinking They shook their heads When she turned away, one guy made a crack and they all laughed

Jane looked so lonesome I suggested a drink I ordered a couple of double Cuttys, a beer chaser for myself We sat in a far corner One of the guys shooting pool reminded me of Dick

I knew Dick from my poker group, one of these self assured guys He drove a Corvette a car too expensive and too young for him His lazy eyes never betrayed his cards A tattooed eagle screamed on his forearm. He pumped his muscles at the gym and always shot his deer the first day of the season. Somebody said he had killed a man down in Florida You could believe it with him you could believe anything

It didn't matter that he earned lean wages at a body shop or that he lived in a house trailer There was something complete about him, something I envied

What didn't fit was Jane Where Dick was a closed book, she was sincere, wide open, a searcher She was not the type you would expect somebody like Dick to connect with Guys said it was the name, Dick had to have his Jane Or they said he had knocked her up and his private code of honor had kicked in But Dick and Jane had been together five years and the twins were still in diapers In the end, Jane was just one more element of Dick's mystery.

That he walked out on her surprised no one He stopped coming to the poker sessions One guy spotted him at a bar in town, said the redhead hanging on him was all legs and belly button.

'Why would he leave?' Jane asked me that night.

I swallowed hard trying to think of a way to explain Dicks rejection Then I understood she meant Spot

'It's in the genes," I said, trying to sound like I knew something.

"Larry was starting to stand up holding on to Spot's coat—it was so cute. The twins were Larry and Gary."

"I understand dogs," I said. "We always had dogs when I was a kid. You know how they say their power of smell is so incredible? They have a sense of themselves, too, that's hard for us to grasp. They're a pack animal, but they always have a streak of lone wolf in 'em, too."

"You think we'll find him?"

"Sure," I said, smiling. "He'll come back. They always do, my experience. It's a dog's nature."

She bit her lip and said, "Do you have any idea what he did to me?"

She was talking about Dick now. The Scotch was softening her and she was starting to talk personal. I don't like personal. Personal makes me uncomfortable. "No, I don't, Jane."

She made a fist and looked at it and looked at me.

"But you?" I said. She nodded. She was on the verge of bawling. I watched my fingers reach across and touch her face. It was a delicate face, like a child's. I could not imagine anyone hitting her.

"More," she said. "He threatened to kill me. He meant it. I never gave him anything to be jealous about, but he would go crazy, punch me." She caressed her ribs as if they still hurt.

I didn't want to listen to this, didn't want to get involved. You married the guy, I felt like saying.

Instead, I went for more drinks. The men all shouted at once. Maybe the Bills had scored—the television was flashing its gaudy colors down at the end of the bar. I brought the glasses back to the table.

"Do you think it was my fault?" she asked me.

"No, I don't think so."

We drank. She told me about Dick, things that surprised me and didn't surprise me. He had spent two years in Attica on an

assault rap and was currently on probation for drugs. He carried a pistol, she said, a Colt Python.

I steered the talk back to Spot. 'Just a little adventure before he settles in for the winter. Two or three days, he'll be back, all burrs, a big smile on his face. You'll see.'

She was quiet for a minute. "Do you believe," she said, "that a person can make one wrong turn and suddenly your life becomes a nightmare? I thought it would get better after the twins, but it only got worse. I was scared to leave them alone with him. It was awful. I've never dared tell this to anybody."

She was one of these people who exaggerate everything.

She started talking about my wife, what a good person my wife was. I agreed. People open up with my wife. They never open up with me. I don't have the personality for it. When people go on about their doubts, it makes me doubt myself.

The top couple of buttons of her flannel shirt had come undone. I couldn't help looking. I don't know how I got to be holding her hand. She gripped my fingers the way a kid does.

Then we were dancing. Somebody had put "The Tennessee Waltz" on the jukebox. Jane pushed against me, her thighs brushed my thighs. I held her tight—I felt it was the right thing to do, to comfort her. Maybe I needed a little comfort myself.

On the way home, searching for Spot seemed pointless. The next morning I read where the Bills had lost by a single point.

Two weeks passed. Jane was over at our house almost every day. She blew hot and cold. Either Spot was dead, or he was out sowing his canine oats. She would never see him again, or he would turn up any minute, ready to dream his escapades by the wood stove. A UPS truck had run him down, a family with three kids had adopted him. Some redneck hunter had blasted him in the woods, somebody like Dick.

Time chewed up hope. Only a miracle could bring Spot home now, divine intervention. The hand of God was all that could

carry him down the hill, ears swept back, tongue lolling—Spot, forgive us our trespasses.

Jane did a lot of crying. My wife explained how Jane had bottled up the hurt after Dick left, how she was getting in touch with her pain. The wife helped her with the twins, sat and talked with her for hours. I avoided Jane when I could. Sometimes she would shoot me a look in passing—what was it supposed to mean?

I found myself walking in the woods a lot, searching for Spot. Not that I was soft on dogs. We had had plenty of dogs when I was growing up. One time a pickup truck had clipped our German shepherd, King. He came crawling up to the door, his pelvis shattered. My father carried him out behind the garage on an old piece of rug. He told me to bring the Remington .410. You do it, he said. I didn't want to. I remember King's brown eye looking around at me. I sighted. My hand was shaking a little. I never shot anything again in my life.

As I walked, I remembered how I had loved the pulse of nature when we first moved here. I recognized trees whose gestures I had admired. Why had I hunkered down to the puny blare of the NFL? Where had my life gone?

Rambling over the hills, I thought about Jane. What would she do now? Welfare? Put the twins in day care and drive a school bus? I thought of her in that house alone, thought about her lips, her vulnerable eyes, the way her flesh had felt pressed against me.

I thought maybe I would find Spot. I imagined Jane's delight when I brought him back. O happy day. I imagined her kissing me with gratitude.

Then came the final ray of hope. My seven-year old, groping in the bottom of a Chips Ahoy! bag, announced that she had seen Spot from the school bus. Out by the old landfill.

"He barked at me," she said.

"Are you sure?"

"Hope to die."

I was dubious, but the wife was standing right there and said, "Don't you think you should check it out?"

It was a raw Saturday. Jane brought the twins over and I drove her.

"Don't get your hopes up," I told her.

"Hopes?" She wouldn't look at me. The shadow of tears made her face seem naked.

The dump had been closed for years. The ranks of junked cars were becoming part of the landscape. We slipped through a gap some kids had cut in the hurricane fence. Clouds were spitting needles of rain.

We separated. Jane called Spot without enthusiasm. The wind crumpled the dog's name like a scrap of paper.

I knew an animal wouldn't hang around here. There was nothing but gravel, a rusted baby carriage, broken glass. I climbed a hill covered in thistle. You could look out over the landscape from up there. I saw Jane walking aimlessly below me. Then she stopped and glanced around. I realized that she was looking for me—she hadn't seen where I went.

I descended quickly. Because of the wind, she didn't notice me until I was almost to her. She turned. Her face changed, eased.

I stood close to her. She smiled and blinked.

"He's gone," she said. She was resigned now.

The rain was coming harder. It wet her face. Suddenly I was kissing her. She clung to me. In the car I turned the heat up high.

I thought about a trip I had taken out to Erie to visit my in-laws. I remembered driving back at night on the interstate, the wife dozing, the girls asleep on the backseat. In an instant I was across the median, headlights coming right at me. Reflex. I yanked the wheel. We skidded past a horn, fishtailed across the grass. I wrestled it back onto the pavement.

The wife said stop, but I didn't stop. I wasn't about to stop. I laughed. Something had broken open in me. I felt alive, wide awake. That feeling, which I thought would never go away, lasted two days.

The same sensation gripped me now. Awake in a way that made my life one long sleep. Feelings that I had armored myself against came pouring in.

We pulled into her driveway.

I imagined he needed me," Jane said.

"I know."

I was so glad when he left, yet I didn't want him to go. Is that awful?"

"No, it's human."

Rain hammered on the roof of the car. We sat for a minute with the engine running. She thanked me for my help, said she was glad she hadn't had to go alone. That word 'alone,' hung between us, clothed our knowledge that her twins were at my house with my wife.

The trailer was crowded and smelled of ashes. The woodstove had gone out. She shoved a double stroller out of the way. A jumbo box of Pampers sat open on the table.

She offered coffee. I refused. She said she had known all along it was hopeless. I asked what she meant.

"About Spot," she said.

In the bedroom she turned down a picture on the dresser before I could see it. I unbuttoned her shirt. Her skin was rough with goose pimples, her breasts swollen, her lips eager. She pulled back the covers. The soft springs creaked. She drew me to her, repeating my name. The bed tittered.

There's so much loss in the world. Dogs run away. Twins grow up without a father. November rains come. What can we do but endure? We find warmth where we can, when we can. Sometimes it arrives in the most unexpected ways.

The bed chuckled. Then it laughed outright. Guffawed. Filled the room, the whole trailer, with its hilarity. Ha ha ha!

Then suddenly the sound ceased. We fell still. Listening. What was it? Outside, a dog barked. I saw Jane's face light up.

I lifted a slat of the venetian blind. A Corvette was parked behind my car in the driveway. Dick was climbing out. A suitcase in his hand. Spot under his arm.

THE RAIDERS

Gary Phillips

Oh baby, that's it um yes Uh uh that's sweet, darlin Oh yes Damn, oh oh God we're going to break the bed, you big thing you Yeah augh huh? How come you're stopping, sweetie? Oh, you kinky dog, shooting it all over these nice panties you bought me.

"So now you're pulling them off A little late isn't it? Hey where you going, lover? Gonna go in the bathroom and sniff them? Untie me so I can watch If you're going to the kitchen, bring me some peach tea okay Derek?

My rears sore from all that scooting around we did honey First on the damn rug then on the dining room table I guess you got my number when I agreed to let you tie me up with these satin sashes to the bed Oh Lord, hope you don't tell my mama about this She's a God-fearin upright deaconess woman, you know

Derek baby? What's keeping you out there? If you'd be so kind, master, I'd like to be released now if you please Derek, can you hear me or has all our slappin skin made you deaf? Derek . shit Derek, you didn't drop dead out there, did you? Damn, better keep my voice down Wouldn't do for the neighbors to call the law and they roll in here to find me trussed up My butt naked paramour lying on the kitchen floor holding on to a bottle of Snapple.

"I can see the tabloids now Congresswoman Jean Gregory Kills Lobbyist with her Snapping Coochie" Okay, girl get it to

gether, you ain't had that much Hennessy. Gotta get an arm loose. Damn, he knotted them pretty good. Uggh, dammit. I'm starting to get cold as I cool off. Damn. All right, rather than try to get one of my wrists loose, maybe I can get one of the ends free from around the bedpost. If I can do that, I could stop being so nervous and mumbling to myself.

Okay, a little more, a little more. Yeah, now once I'm up from here, you'd better be passed out on the toilet, knee-grow. That's the only excuse you've got for keeping me hog-tied, Derek.

Derek? He's not in the kitchen . . . not in the back room office. He wasn't in the dining room either. Only other place is the bathroom . . . damn, that tool is gone. And goddammit, where's my clothes and purse? I left them on the couch. Except my panties, which he insisted I put back on when he tied me to the bed.

"Oh shit, a fuckin' setup. That horse dick bastard done set me up. Fuck. I'm in the company apartment, all my goddamn clothes are gone, and it's the middle of the goddamn night.

"Fuck me.

"Okay, do something, Jean, do something quick. . . . Tina, she's the only one I can call.

"Tina? Sorry to bother you at home on a Friday night, but girl, this is serious. You have company? Sorry, like I said, this is a political emergency. Girlfriend, it takes too long to explain, but what was the name of that friend of yours that's a private eye?

"Ivan, right. He's a Russian? Uh, huh? Uh huh. He's black, good. Is he a roughneck, Tina? 'Cause I need one right now, Tina, I'm not bullshittin'. Girl, I'm in a bad fix.

"Look, I need somebody who can find an item of value, and I mean tonight. But he's got to be trusted, understand? This Ivan's the man, huh? Frankly, I ain't got much in the way of choice. Can you call him for me and have him meet me at the Dominguez Hills Towers out here in Carson? Room 306.

"Ah one more thing Tina I need him to bring me some clothes It's too long to go into now Let's put it this way I'm sitting here bare-assed nekkid as you please, and colder than the Republicans are to welfare mothers

'But listen, maybe he can bring me a pair of sweats or leotards and a top Oh, and uh, shoes and socks too, all right? Jesus Christ the Almighty, Tina, don't start on that now please "

"This Derek Jackson is a lobbyist for Byzant Industries? Monk suppressed his smile getting his cherry 64 Ford Galaxie onto the 405 Freeway south.

Jean Gregory worked her jaw muscles, her hands slicing the air like an automated scythe She was now wearing tights and an oversize sweat top with the logo of Hastings Law School on it It was the property of Monk's significant other, Superior Court Judge Jill Kodama He appreciated that she was an understanding woman who had willingly lent the clothes A hefty California Penal Code book lay on the backseat Monk had needed it to look up a statute for a case he was working on And was going to return the borrowed book to the offices of his lawyer Parren Teague, but hadn't done so yet

Ten minutes ago Gregory had been in a towel when she answered Monk's knock Yes for the second time, she blared impatiently.

And Byzant, among its many endeavors is looking to get a variance signed off by your subcommittee to build a solid-waste plant in your district he went on rhetorically 'On top of that, to use the expression, you and Jackson were going at it hot and heavy like soldiers on leave for the last month or so

That wasn't influencing my position on the merits, or lack thereof, concerning the project."

He checked a wry comment Why are these articles of cloth-

ing so important to retrieve?' A late-model maroon Cadillac Eldorado suddenly veered into their lane in front of them. Monk had to pat the brakes to prevent rear-ending the inattentive driver.

Gregory, a woman still earning a second look in her early fifties, tenderized her bottom lip with evenly capped teeth. Her dark skin glistened with a varnish of panicked sweat reflecting the passing lights of cars. 'It's the panties I need to get back,' she finally admitted.

'Well, well.' This time he didn't stifle a hearty guffaw.

"Listen," she said, fixing her wide ambers on him. "I'm not apologizing for shit here. I'm twice-divorced, grown children, and can manage to wiggle into a cocktail dress now and then."

Monk glanced at her muscular legs, testament to hours on the treadmill. 'The panties,' he repeated.

The congresswoman slumped against the Ford's vinyl upholstery. "I was very circumspect."

"Just snapshots." You guys didn't burn a CD?'

"Are you going to help me, or did you come out here to satisfy your prurient interests?' she flared.

'Self-revelation is the nature of the external investigation,' Monk remarked.

She straightened up and jabbed a lavender nail at him. "Look here, Deepak Chopra, during the gymnastics Derek and I performed in the apartment, he asked me to keep those panties on at one point, understand? He said it made him really hard. He'd bought them for me last Valentine's Day. Anyway, lemme make it clear to you. Those panties are soaked with my body fluids and his. And thus proof positive of our tryst.'

Monk pictured a press conference wherein Jackson would dangle aloft the soiled goods in a Ziploc bag as video cameras whirred. 'So Bryant wants to blackmail you into okaying this variance?"

We don't need to go into all that. What you do need to be

doing is plotting how you're going to earn that thousand I'm paying you for a couple of hours' work.'

Angrily Monk said, 'Just 'cause I voted for you last time doesn't mean you have carte blanche with me, Ms. Gregory. The only reason I got out of a warm bed with the woman I love, watching the original version of *The Glass Key* with George Raft that I've never seen, is because of Tina. You want my help, I don't go down blind alleys. Now what's up? Or what corner would you like me to let you out on?"

For several ticks she stared out the window as the Galaxie rode across the sparsely populated freeway. It was as if they were traveling through a concrete desert. 'Not surprisingly, Byzant has met organized opposition in trying to build this plant.'

'I read that in the *L.A. Times* a week or so ago.' Monk exited and got on Slauson east, heading toward Windsor Hills and the home of the gone-missing Mr. Jackson. 'The residents in that neighborhood don't buy the company's claims that the solid waste process will not cause health problems."

Byzant's regional head of operations out here, a man named Hollis Rand, swore things like runoffs and airborne toxins were rectified at previous facilities. So I talked with the city attorney down in Decatur, Georgia, where Byzant built a similar facility. Also a reverend in Lexington who'd been part of a community opposition group to another of their plants. They both said after organized pressure, Byzant fulfilled their promises. The city attorney even faxed me a few op-eds attesting to that.' Her attention was miles away, the words having little shading.

"But you know different?' Monk ventured, driving the car past the Fox Hills Mall.

She snorted. 'On the down low, my staff found out the right reverend had suddenly acquired a wondrous, two-story brick home and boat."

'And the city attorney in Atlanta?'

"Bryant was a big contributor to his last campaign race. His cousin is the editorial writer on the paper."

Monk took Angeles Vista into the Windsor Hills section. Thereafter, he had to follow her specific instructions to negotiate the winding avenues of the enclave.

The two arrived at Jackson's address on Orinda. The home was a comfortable looking ranch house with an expansive porch framed in Ionic pilasters. A light tucked underneath the overhang cast a weak glow.

"Naturally I don't see his car." Gregory was already moving out of the Galaxie before it had come to a complete stop.

Monk caught up to her on the porch. "You have a key?"

"We hadn't progressed that far." She pushed against the solid door forcibly. "Come on. Looks like you work out, we can get this thing open."

Monk folded his arms and leaned on one of the pillars. "This place is wired."

"Huh?" She fumed at the door.

He pointed at the security company's sticker in the corner of the oval leaded glass set in the door. "Besides, you're making way too much noise."

"Goddammit." She jerked hard on the latch, turning and snarling at him. "If the only use you have all night is to spout your little fucked-up homilies and sputter sarcasm, why the hell do I have you along? I need someone who can give me results." She stalked off around the corner of the house.

Monk moved out of the light onto the side of the porch. He was acutely aware that this neighborhood of Lexuses and BMWs berthed in driveways framed by well tended lawns was not apt to be keen on two strangers prowling about.

After a few moments Gregory returned. "What the fuck are you doing?" Her voice was high, and her eyes wet with desperation.

"What do you suggest we do, Jean? I didn't bring my *Star Trek* matter transporter to get us inside."

She rushed at Monk like she was going to tag him. "I've got to get those panties back," she shouted.

"He's not here. Jackson is moving around or he's sitting in one of Byzant's labs running up an analysis of your love juices. Which reminds me, how is it your precious body fluids are a matter of public record?"

Gregory clasped her face in her hands. "Do you have something resembling a plan?"

"Not particularly. But how about we try a few of y'all's haunts? You never know who might be around, and what they've seen or heard."

"That's useless." Gregory panned her head back and forth along the street, as if employing telepathy to snare Jackson's lingering thought patterns.

"We damn sure can't get into Byzant's offices, and we can't get into his house. What's the alternatives?"

Gregory didn't have an answer as they left. They tried one spot not too far away on La Tijera but gained nothing. Then the pair headed toward downtown to a club called Little J's.

"My sexual appetite has been the subject of several files of oppositional research." Gregory had calmed down or had resigned herself to a bleak outcome, and spoke quietly. "A couple of years ago, a challenger, you know that crazy-ass Hatch Nelson, made his robust health a campaign issue. It was a strategy to force me to disclose my medical records." Gregory shifted in the seat, gazing at Monk.

"If I were a man, I'd be one of the guys the others always clap on the back and buy him a round so he could regale them about which chick he banged that week. But be a woman with an active—" She shook her head at the contradictions of sexism.

"Anyway, I had to have a full physical, which naturally in

cludes screening for AIDS and other STDs." Gregory massaged her head beneath a tangle of curly brown hair. "I was clean as a cue ball, so that undercut Nelson's bullshit. But this time, even if I say Jackson is a liar, I'm sure the press would demand I prove it by having a DNA screening like Clinton had to do."

"Yeah," Monk acknowledged, "but you could allege Jackson used Rohypnol or a similar date rape drug on you and you didn't know squat until you came to."

"That's not bad. I'd have to ingest some so it would be in my system."

"We'd have to be careful. That stuff's killed several unsuspecting women. Plus there are witnesses who've seen you two together. Fraud ain't as easy to do as people think." He smiled.

She touched his upper arm. "Thanks for the effort, Ivan."

He got the car onto Olive Street, near their destination. Unlike cities such as San Francisco, Chicago, and New York, downtown L.A. at night was a gigantic movie set awaiting the return of the extras the next day. Nothing stirred except the few places like the Staples Center with its sports teams, a few twenty-four-hour eateries, and Little J's, a red brick two-story building tucked halfway down the block on Olive.

The place was open daily and served a buffet lunch to the nearby office drones. But on Friday and Saturday nights, it jumped with canned and live music. J's was a gathering place for midlevel bureaucrats, secretaries on their way to being producers, a few off-duty LAPD detectives, and even a smattering of proletarians looking to bump up in the catch chain.

"I see a couple of people who know Derek," Gregory said after they'd paid the cover and wedged their way into the club. "Let me see what I can find out."

She went off and Monk stiff-armed his way to the bar to order a beer. Looking around the packed throng that sipped and bopped its collective head to the Ohio Players' "Roller Coaster,"

he knew he'd have a better chance finding Madonna at a chastity rally than Mr Jackson Tina Chalmers would owe him a pretty favor for this fool's errand And it didn't hurt to have an ambitious politician, currently a councilwoman but running for a county supervisor seat, beholden to you At least his beer was cold

A Slavic-looking blonde built like a WWF wrestler, was on the end of the bar posing with a martini glass She was in a tight black mini that five grown men would beat each other stupid to help her put on The woman was talking to her friend, a Latina Monk guessed who was less bulky but also buff There was a wide gold band encircling one of the blonde's overdeveloped triceps.

He noticed the two because the lighter haired one would look at him, then whisper to her friend. He could also feel the back of his neck getting warm from the two black women boring heat vision from their narrowed eyes into his back while the white babe checked him out.

It got worse because the Slavic one approached One of the black women audibly mumbled Goddamn why don't you just use a rope to lasso him, shit."

'You're not a regular ' the blond bruiser said over the start of Los Lobos Down on the Riverbed '

He couldn't attach the accent to a country "Well Sheriff, I'm just passing through " He didn't dare look around

Her dark eyes sparkled over the rim of her glass as she took a drink. "My name's Jara."

Oh, please, one of the women behind him groaned

She pronounced the "J" softly, a melodious contrast to the deft configurations of her body A bit of honest flirtation was good for honing off the dull edges, he reasoned feebly Ivan '

'Nice You look like an Ivan ' Her husky voice pronounced the 'I like it was an 'E She engulfed him with her smoldering agates.

Gregory came back, breaking the spell. "Let's bounce. I didn't learn a damn thing and there's another lead I just remembered. Derek's mother lives on St. Andrews near Washington. She might know something."

Monk waved good-bye to the pleasantly smiling Jara. Outside, he was unlocking his Ford in the parking lot when his street senses kicked in. He turned as the two robust women were almost to them. He smiled like a goof and was on his back before he realized Jara had laced his jaw with a short left. She then calmly and methodically aimed her three-inch spike at his groin. Monk rolled, the end of the heel clipping him on his thigh. He yelped but didn't slow.

Like an old school break-dancer, he spun himself on his shoulder so he could latch a hand onto one of the woman's corded legs and yanked. She went down and he got to his feet, the friend rushing him from his right side. His overhand blow landed flush, dazing but not dropping her. Gregory leaped on the friend's back, the two sliding across the hood of a maroon Caddy.

Gregory and the woman went at it as Monk concentrated on the big blonde. Jara reared up, grunting and flexing her rock hard upper arms and got them around Monk's waist, driving him like an NFL tackle. He slammed against the side of the empty attendant's booth.

"Fucker," she railed, burying a fist in his kidney and flattening her other set of knuckles alongside his nose.

Monk's vision went momentarily off kilter. Desperately he unlimbered an elbow into the flat of the woman's face. He followed with a punch up and under her rib cage. She went slack, and he delivered an upraised knee to her jaw.

Blood streamed from one of his nostrils. Their fight had attracted a small crowd leering on the sidewalk in front of Little J's. Jara's dress was up higher and tighter across her exquisitely hewn backside, exposing thong underwear. Men and women were

hooting and clapping as she circled in on Monk. The two black women who'd been commenting weren't sure whom to root for, and stood implacably watching, arms folded.

The strong woman flung herself on him as if they were performing a tango choreographed by the Marquis de Sade. She grabbed his head, and her horse teeth clamped on his cheek, grinding into the meat. Monk bellowed in pain and put her in a bear hug. She tightened her powerful legs around him. But he'd hoped for that so he could use their combined weight to tip the two of them over onto the ground. They slammed onto the asphalt, the impact getting her mouth loose.

He punched his way free and straddled her, pinning her arms to the ground. The crowd, now in the middle of the street, sent up a cacophony. Jara bucked but Monk's 220 plus kept him in place. "Yoli," she called out to the other one as if enticing a familiar.

Monk felt elated, a lurid sense of control making him light in the head. But that was merely a passing sensation when Jara's partner tackled him.

He went sprawling while Yoli rocked and socked his back and sides. There was clapping and booing, the Romans having decided their favorites. Monk managed to get himself halfway up just in time to get clacked on the jaw. He reeled and she took full advantage. Yoli liked close action and went to work on his body. Jara, back on her feet and in full effect, gleefully gouged him in the face with a heel when she got an opening.

Yoli laughed and it was a bitter wind across fallow land.

Her malice gave Monk motivation. Damned if he was going to be beaten down in the streets by woman or man. He rushed forward and plowed Yoli into Jara, sending them off balance. Losing blood and strength, Monk unloaded a right and left into Yoli's six-pack. It didn't double her over, but it did give her pause. He closed in, but Jara clipped him flush on the chewed side of his

face and it hurt. He staggered back against a Navigator. When he bumped it, one of those talking alarms went off. A sweet grandmotherly voice advised, "Step away from my ride, muthafucka."

"Let's finish this fool so we can get the rest of our money," Yoli said contemptuously. "I want to get some sun in Palm Springs." Her accent matched Jara's.

The two came in on Monk from either side. The crowd was silent, excited by the anticipated climax. Except the two black women had made up their minds.

"Come on, man, get your fists up," one extolled.

"Be like Lennox," the other advised. "Don't let them crazy broads do you in."

Monk blocked a punch from Yoli but wasn't fast enough to prevent Jara from busting him one in the gut. He started to sink down under a rain of blows and he had the premonition he wouldn't be getting back up anytime soon. But then Yoli's head went sideways with a pop. She poleaxed into the Navigator, her forehead bouncing off the rear quarter panel.

Congresswoman Gregory huffed from the effort of hitting the dark-haired woman upside the head with the lawbook from Monk's car. And Jara, momentarily distracted by concern for her friend, looked back at Monk in time to be drilled in her face. Like in a boxing movie where the director uses slow motion to heighten the drama of the blow, Monk saw her face turn as a reaction to his punch. He gritted his teeth, then plowed her with a short twisting jab. The bodybuilder went over onto her side, huffing like a train.

"Nice work," a thankful Monk said to Gregory. He sucked in air, bent over with his hands on his knees. Quickly getting himself in order, he scooped up Jara's purse and dumped out its contents. He couldn't help but notice that the woman's dress was way up over her magnificent buttocks. He got closer.

"We don't have time for any freaky-deak, Monk," Gregory rasped.

He didn't respond and soon returned his attention to the stuff from Jara's clutch bag. Both women stirred and moaned. He snatched up a cell phone and thumbed its readout on and smiled. The two hurriedly departed in his Ford. As he drove on, his body began to stiffen and ache.

"I've got trouble," Gregory said in a passable imitation of the big blonde's throaty voice. She spoke to the man who'd answered after they'd hit redial on Jara's cell. She listened, grunted, then clicked off.

"Now we're in the game," she said elatedly. "I'm pretty sure that was Hollis Rand on the other end. We're supposed to meet at the Pacific Dining Car on 6th. From what I could gather those two were supposed to put us in the hospital to prevent me from doing any counterspin to control the story once it broke tomorrow morning."

Monk tenderly massaged his swollen face, his curious mind active even as his body wanted to shut down. "Why the hell is Byzant so eager to get this plant built, Jean? Rig a blackmail scheme against you and have a couple of amazons out gunning for you?"

"I really don't know, Ivan."

"Jara had a tattoo on her upper thigh. It was a bayonet spearing a gear. There was Cyrillic writing encircling the design."

Gregory kept mum.

Monk drove farther, then spoke again. "Look," he began, his hands trembling as he gripped the steering wheel tightly, "I've been bit, beat, and drop kicked, and I swear by the plastic Jesus I ain't got on my dash, you don't start talking, our next stop is to a bar containing a couple of reporters of my acquaintance."

She knew it wasn't a bluff.

"Byzant, through overseas cutouts, has contracts to clean up

nuclear waste in areas once part of the Soviet Union. My office verified that their plan was to surreptitiously ship some of this material into parts of the U.S."

"The inner city and the South in particular," Monk added dryly.

"Yes," she uttered softly.

"Places the major tree-hugging types don't always get all goose-pimply for," Monk noted. "How'd you find out about this?"

"I had a new planning deputy who, it turned out, had a sister who worked for Green Now, the international environmental organization. When she heard about Byzant seeking a variance, bells and whistles went off for her. She got us reports through Green Now's European branch not widely circulated over here. It alleged what Byzant was attempting to do."

Monk caught sight of his puffy features in the rearview mirror. "In the words, almost, of the late politician Jess Unruh, if you can't fuck their men, drink their liquor, take their money, and still vote against them, you shouldn't be in politics." They were getting close to the restaurant that was open all night.

Gregory sagged like she'd been hit. "Yes, I took their money, the bribe," she croaked. "Only my deputy's sister, who obtained the information for my office, had hinted about the reports to some friends of hers in the alternative press here who smelled a big story. If I went through with my yes vote, I'd be cooked. It would look too suspicious, and sure to trigger an investigation."

"What a fuckin' shame." He coughed. Monk was having trouble breathing through his nose.

Gregory started to respond but didn't.

"So meanwhile, you're still banging Byzant's boy toy. And he swipes your panties to keep you in line. 'Cause he can tell you're starting to get cold feet. Jara and her muff-diving pal were supposed to get me out of the way and make sure you understood what was what." He pulled the car into the Pacific Dining Car

lot. The valet opened the door for Gregory. She was moving slow as if going through a pool of thick oil.

"Inside." Monk came close to her—"we're going to find Jackson and Rand. And Rand will offer me some sweetener for my coffee, won't he, Jean? 'Cause the other rule of politics is, if you can't beat 'em, buy 'em."

"He's willing to go one, two hundred thousand for you to keep quiet, he told me when I made the call," she admitted. "Rand knew it wasn't Jara on the phone."

"You know, once upon a time, you used to stand for something, Congresswoman. I remember you out there on the front lines leading the fight to divest the state's funds in any company doing business with the apartheid regime of South Africa. Or the time you and a few other colleagues went on a hunger strike to symbolize your opposition to questionable cop killings."

Gregory gave him a wan smile. "You get tired of tilting in the wind, Monk. You win some, but you lose most."

"That may be so." He held the door open for her. "Come on, your colleagues are waiting for you."

That Monday, Congresswoman Jean Gregory held a press conference announcing her resignation from office. Her last act was to vote down a zoning variance for Byzant Industries. And the report alleging their dumping scheme was leaked to several press outlets.

And after about a week and a half, Monk could breathe through his nose again.

THE DAFFODIL

Annette Meyers and Martin Meyers

You could say this is a story about sex, retribution, and greed
Actually you can say whatever you like

But no bones about it this is a New York story, and the characters who take their turn on the stage are local talent

Let's start with Foster Haynes the most notorious gambler in New York.

Foster Haynes pretty much always knew the outcome of any horse race or ball game before the event took place He was not honed sharp as the late Arnold Rothstein, but he was just as slick.

Legs Diamond, who among other interests owned the Hotsy Totsy Club, a speakeasy with mostly naked dancing girls at 54th and Broadway, called Foster pal Which was fine, if you could believe Legs Diamond had any pals

Then there was Foster Haynes's better half, Ethe Haynes, born Elfrieda Becker Ethe Haynes was an ex-dancing girl, a petite creature, not so slim now, who loved her position in life and had no plans to give it up.

Let's not forget the old, boozy, down at the heels cop Clancy and the enterprising madam Polly Adler, who when testifying before the Seabury Commission claimed to be a student of the human condition, such studies being carried on at her many whorehouses, scattered conveniently around the city

And last but certainly not least the Daffodil (these speakeasy club dancers were dubbed daffodils), one Lily Blume,

long of leg, firm of thigh, more than enough bosom to make a fellow sweat.

Lily was the girl of the moment doing her act at the Hotsy Totsy Club au naturel in a giant martini glass, gin up to her pink-nippled tits.

The bees buzzed around our Lily looking for honey She had it And she didn't need lessons on how to use it

Let's begin with Lily.

The End of an Affair

"Where are we going?" Lily whispered wary but excited Her lover Foster Haynes could always be counted on to come up with a surprise Last week he'd taken her to one of Polly Adlers establishments and they'd watched through a small opening in the wall of the room Miss Adler had provided, while two masked men screwed one of Miss Adlers most beautiful girls five ways from Sunday The exhibition had inspired Foster to perform miracles which was why he had seen to it that they'd had their own room

Tonight he had taken her to the Ziegfeld to see Ed Wynn in *Simple Simon* followed by supper at the Central Park Casino, where Foster had a short whispered chat with Mayor Jimmy Walker whose favorite club it was

Beau Jimmy had kissed her hand and told her that her number in the martini glass was swell and that she'd do just fine Which didn't make any sense to her at the time, but would later

Lily and Foster danced while Eddy Duchin played "Love Me or Leave Me" from *Simple Simon* Fosters lips brushed her throat I have a surprise he said.

Foster led Lily followed They traipsed through the grass of Central Park, the dew playing hell with her satin slippers.

"Foster, sweetheart," she said as they weaved in and out

among large trees she wouldn't have believed could exist in Manhattan. "you know what a city girl I am."

"Shh."

"But . . . oh!"

The flickering glow came from dozens of votive candles in a ring around a pink satin quilt laid out on the grass in a clearing. Alongside the quilt, a picnic basket and a silver ice bucket, containing a bottle of champagne. Draped around the bottle's neck —she was stunned— a diamond bracelet.

Lily was no fool. When Foster Haynes gave his baby a diamond bracelet, it meant bye-bye blackbird. But not yet, damn it all. She wasn't ready. Not before she squeezed a little more out of him. Who was his new one? She'd heard nothing through the grapevine. Ah, but now she understood what Beau Jimmy had said to her, that she'd be fine.

Okay, Foster, you son of a bitch, she thought. She had more class than he had. 'Where'd you get the candles?'

"Tim relieved them from St. Pat's."

'Foster, you're going to burn in hell.'

"Aren't we all?' He reached behind her and undid the back of her lime green dress and slid the straps from her shoulders.

'You're the devil, you know.' Silk settled around her ankles.

'Devils don't burn, they light the fire.' He took the bracelet from the neck of the champagne bottle and slipped it on her wrist.

'A well earned tribute," she murmured. She held her wrist toward the light. The diamonds could have been bigger. But she made no protest when he lifted her in his arms and placed her on the satin quilt. She'd become adept at separating her body from her mind.

As she lay on the quilt listening to the night sounds, Foster removed his dinner jacket and popped the cork on the champagne.

"I need a glass," she said.

"I don't." He drizzled champagne over her body.

She shivered. "That's cold."

"I'll take care of it." His tongue darted like a snake's and licked a big slurp from the hollow of her throat.

Lily enjoyed the sensation; she enjoyed Foster; but she was impatient for him to get on with it. He always took so long. That was the frustration and the joy of being made love to by Foster Haynes.

By the time he reached her breasts, alternately stroking and sucking her nipples, she was trembling.

"Oh, God, please, don't make me wait."

"Patience is better." His tongue was hot at her belly, sucking the wine from what he called her umbilical nook. She grabbed his slick black hair and pushed his head lower.

From inside the Casino Duchin reprised "Love Me or Leave Me."

One Week Later

Scowling venom at the little guy, the fat cop picked him up and slammed him on the table, causing the smaller man's legs to shoot out like two sticks.

Lily leaped from her chair, which was anchored to the floor.

The old cop had a big grease spot on his lapel, booze on his breath, and a mean glint in his eye. Lily knew him because he hung around the club like he was somebody.

"Siddown," he yelled. He didn't have to tell her twice.

"Honest, copper, I don't know anything." The little man the cop was using for a punching bag blubbered, bloody drool dripping like a baby's.

The cop drew his Smith & Wesson and pointed it at the poor bastard's head. "Talk."

"About what?" the man screeched. "I don't know nuttin'."

"Yeah? Why didn't you show up for work?"

"I was sick."

"Yeah, you're gonna be a whole lot sicker." The cop squeezed the trigger. Click.

The little man moaned, let out a hiccuping giggle.

"Yeah, I'm a laugh a minute." The cop glanced over at Lily and back at the little man. "Get the hell out of here."

The man skittered for the door, ran into it, fumbled it open, staggering off on wobbly legs.

The fat dick's name was Clancy. One time he'd been a big-shot copper. Now he was a plainclothes sap looking to reclaim his career. He fit right in with the windowless room and the dirty wood floors and cinder block walls, dingy and scarred, smelling of old piss and stale cigars.

The only light came from the gooseneck lamp he had pointed directly into her eyes.

She watched Clancy's yellow-stained fingers on the pack of Camels he was moving back and forth on the table. "I could use a fag," she said.

He lit one for himself and blew smoke in her face.

"You're a real gentleman." She shaded her eyes. "That light in my eyes is a cheap trick. Turn it off, will you?"

Clancy made no move toward the lamp. "How long you been Foster Haynes's slut?"

Her nail polish was chipped and one nail had broken. It was almost morning and she was dog tired. She'd worked two shows, afterward, Foster's party . . .

"I got no shame at hurting a frail, blondie."

She let her ermine wrap slip off her shoulders and gave him a good look at the merchandise. "You coulda fooled me."

An edge of a grin started, giving her a glimpse of brown teeth. The grin faded, like she'd caught him out. He shoved the pack-

age of cigarettes across the table and after she took one, lit it for her.

"Who killed Haynes?"

"How would I know?"

Clancy peeled off his coat. His armpits were stained with sweat. She'd smelled worse.

"I thought you was there."

"It was a grand party. There were a lot of people. Someone was playing the piano—"

"And you was sittin on it, singin your little heart out." He sniggered. "Givin' folks a gander at what you're sellin'."

She let the remark pass. What choice did she have?

"And if it was such a great party, why was Haynes sittin in his study?"

"He had a phone call."

"Sure."

"I saw a man go into Foster's study. I didn't recognize him."

"You said he was short. Some kinda midget?"

"No, just shorter than poor Foster." She wiped a tear from her eye.

"Touching."

"What do you know about it?"

This time he didn't respond.

"How was this shorter-than-Haynes guy dressed?"

"A red jacket was all I could make out."

"Nobody wears red jackets."

"Bellhops do."

"Was he a nigger?"

"I don't think so."

"Haynes was a big son of a bitch. Handy with his dukes, from what I hear. I can't imagine a little guy getting the drop on him."

"A sharp knife between the ribs is a great equalizer."

"How'ja know he was done with a shiv?" Clancy mashed his

cigarette out against the table From the table's scars and grooves it was not the first.

"The cop told me."

'Stupid bastard Lily Blume your real name?

'Yes." She closed her eyes and turned her head. Could you hurry it up? The light is giving me a headache.'

He pulled a cigar from his front pocket, bit the tip off, and spat it on the floor The match flare of phosphorus stung her eyes, made her wince.

"Delicate, ain't we?"

"I'm okay."

'Like hell You're in a pickle, you are Haynes bankrolled half the gambling and extortion in the city Big, big moneybags.'

"All I know is he liked the horses."

Clancy snorted 'And on the side he was a fix it man for the Dagos."

She wiped another tear away 'He was a good man.'

'So what was he doing with you?'

"He was kind to me."

'Sure."

'You have no right to keep me here.'

'Need your beauty sleep, working girl?"

"I'm a dancer. I earn my dough."

'I'll bet you do Gettin calluses on your back.' Spittle settled in the corner of his mouth.

Before Lily could answer there was a rap on the door and the young cop who had driven her and Clancy to the precinct house stuck his head in 'Her counselors here.'

She got up and settled her ermine back on her shoulders.

Clancy stuck his boozy face in hers. 'Siddown You think you're the bees knees, don't you, sweetheart?" He gave her a long, hard stare.

She dropped her cigarette and ground it into the floor slowly

with the sole of her delicate silver slipper, so that he got a good glom of her stummy the creep He looked like mush She thought, I know what I got.

'Scram the hell out of here," he velled And don't leave town."

The young cop held the door for her He was one of those dark haired, dark eyed Irish boys She granted him a knowing smile and let her ermine slip just enough to give him a nice peek "Thank you for your courtesy," she stage whispered Why don't you come see my act?"

"You mean there's more?" Clancy shouted

Lily snorted derisively

She strolled out of the precinct house on the arm of Alfred Frommer, Esquire her mouthpiece Hell, he was everyone's mouthpiece There were two kinds of lawyers in New York those who knew the law and those who knew the judge Frommer was the second kind All the dancers used him and when they couldn't pay, he knew how to collect

Let's get going, Frommer said his fingers straying generously enough from her upper arm so he could get himself a good feel.

Clancy on the Case

Clancy flicked off the gooseneck lamp and sat in the dark, smoking The kid had moxie Without it she wouldn't have survived this long Them daffodils were all pretty to begin with but they wilted fast unless they found themselves a sponsor like old Beau Jimmy, our distinguished and honorable mayor of the City of New York, or the late Foster Haynes or Legs Diamond himself.

She hadn't blinked or moved a muscle when he mentioned the bellhop's uniform Either she didn't know anything, or she was a better liar than he gave her credit for One thing for sure,

she didn't know about the bloody bellhop jacket the boys had found on the back stairs.

Clancy heaved himself to his feet. They'd given him a raw recruit to work with. Dennis Moore. Looked more Eyetalian than Irish. What the hell, the lad was eager and willing. Clancy could teach him a thing or two. Make a cop outta him.

'Let's go see the grievin' widow,' he told Moore when they left the station house.

Moore was puzzled. They were heading in the wrong direction—downtown instead of Madison Square and the Ritz Carlton, where Haynes had kept a suite and where the murder had taken place.

He'd been assigned to Clancy, a legend on the force since way back when, but everyone knew that Clancy was a has-been, on his way out. 'Aren't we going the wrong way?" Clancy moved fast for a fat old guy.

'Do you think a toff like Haynes would throw his swarays so's his missus would be rubbin' elbows with daffodils, floozies and hoods? For chrissakes, Moore, use your head."

While the recently departed Mr. Foster Haynes had kept a suite in the Ritz Carlton, the newly widowed Mrs. Foster Haynes lived in a white stone town house on 10th Street just off Fifth Avenue. You couldn't miss it for the big funeral wreath on the front and the black limousines double-parked all around and delivery vans dispensing gaudy flower arrangements and fruit baskets.

"Amazin', Clancy said, gesturing at all the activity. "Everybody in town is celebratin'. The son of a bitch held more IOUs than the Manhattan Bank."

"How'd he get away with it?"

Clancy snorted. Polly Adler was rubbin' his stalk. He knew where every body in the city was buried. And then some.

"Polly Adler,' Moore said. "The madam?"

'Get your head outta your arse, junior.' Clancy hawked up an

oyster and spat into the gutter He mounted the stone steps on the heels of a Western Union boy with a wad of telegrams in his hand

Before Western Union could ring the bell, the door opened, and three somber-faced men stepped out They wore dark suits with black armbands and three of the best fedoras Callahan's could supply a donation from a grateful haberdasher

Soon they'd be drinkin fine whiskey and smokin cigars only a few blocks uptown from here at Tammany Hall, where the Democrat machine ran the city

Clancy cleared his throat with a great harrumph one of the men stopped and shook Clancy's proffered hand.

'Clancy Dolph Tierney said 'Good to see you"

"I'm handlin' the case Mr Tierney,' Clancy replied respectfully "Don't you worry none We'll catch the killer"

Tierney laid his fine hand on Clancy's shoulder, manicured fingernails tippin' and tappin A diamond as big as the Ritz glinted from his little finger Glad to know that, aren't we boys? Makes us feel we can sleep safe in our beds tonight'

Moore watched the threesome climb into one of the limousines.

"They fookin think they're fookin' God Almighty, but they're fookin out to pasture—" He stopped and gave Moore one of his Clancy stares. 'What're you waitin' out here on the stairs for?'

The Western Union boy had come and gone The door to the house was closed again Moore rang the bell and the door was swiftly opened.

What do you want?" The speaker was a chauffeur, all fancy in his black uniform. He was cut from the same cloth as Clancy only thirty years younger He had a surly mouth

"And who in hell might you be? Clancy demanded from behind Moore.

'You got it wrong, bucko" The chauffeur tilted his cap back on his head. "You rang, I opened, you talk'

Clancy bulled past Moore into the vestibule, forcing the chauffeur back. They were chest to chest. "I'm the fookin' cops is who I am," Clancy said so soft you could barely hear. He held his silver shield right up to the man's eyes. "Who the fook are you?"

"I'm Queen of the May," said the chauffeur, backing down not at all.

Clancy, the heavier, pushed, the man stood his ground.

The fat detective went calm, his smile not traveling past his lips. He stepped back and offered his hand. "Clancy."

"McGuire," the other said, still belicose.

"I have McGuire cousins. Lived on Grand Street before the Jews moved in."

McGuire said, "Jasus, another fookin' cousin. Here's my mitt because you're blood. But this is still my place and you're not pushin' in here."

Clancy raised his hands in a peaceful gesture. "When you're right, you're right. We're here to see Mrs. Foster Haynes."

"She's indisposed." The English accented response came from an extremely tall man in butler's getup who had appeared behind McGuire. The chauffeur stepped aside.

"Another fookin country heard from." Clancy's face was hot with frustration.

The butler said, "I'll have to ask you to watch your language."

Grinning, the chauffeur said, "He's a copper. Says his name's Clancy."

"Mr. Clancy, is it? It is not my concern how you talk in your house, but this is the house of a lady, and your rudeness will not be tolerated."

Clancy growled. People didn't say no to him. Anywhere else he'd break a few heads.

"McGuire, I want the Packard ready now."

McGuire's manner underwent a complete transformation

"Yes, Mr Horton Looking sheepish, he edged past Clancy and Moore and out to the street.

Clancy tilted his head and Moore followed McGuire.

I'm conductin' an investigation into the murder of her husband,' Clancy informed the butler in even tones 'I think she'd be happy to speak to me."

'That is debatable, Horton replied like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

The double doors opened and out came a plump little creature in black silk A rich woman's widow's weeds Though she wore a hat black net veil down over her eyes, you could see she wasn't a girl anymore Still, she was a damned good-lookin' woman and she moved with a kind of grace

"Always my good soldier, Horton Thank you, you may go'

"Yes, madam He exited through the double doors like an actor leaving the stage.

I'm Effie Haynes What can I do for you, Mr Clancy?

"You know who I am?"

'I have not lived in a convent, Mr Clancy I read the newspapers and I have read of your heroic exploits'

Clancy couldn't help preening 'I'm investigatin' the brutal demise of your—"

Well of course,' she said 'And I know you will find the assassin, and I appreciate your coming to pay your respects, but I must break the terrible news to my husband's dear mama who is recovering from influenza."

May I offer my deepest condolences for your loss Clancy said formally 'A tragedy after such a long, happy marriage'

'Thank you, Mr Clancy Mr Haynes was " Her voice caught and she took a lacy handkerchief from her small purse and without lifting the veil dabbed at her eyes

Clancy detected the faintest of accents, barely noticeable at all 'You're not from New York, Miz Haynes?'

"New Orleans, Mr. Clancy." She offered nothing further and would have been out the door had Clancy not been standing in her way.

"And how did you meet Mr. Haynes?"

"Could we not leave this for another time, Mr. Clancy?"

Clancy would have given his little finger to get a look at her eyes. Dollars to horseshit, the woman had somethin' to hide. But unless he assaulted her and removed the veil, he was not gonna get his wish. He stood aside. "Of course we can, Miz Haynes."

Moore was waiting on the sidewalk, practically bustin' his buttons with whatever it was he'd learned. Clancy put a steadying hand on his arm. "Easy," he said as the chauffeur helped the Widow Haynes into her car.

Clancy growled, "Whatcha got for me?"

"Haynes had a new girl—"

"Haynes always had a new girl—"

"Yeah, well, this one he was going to marry."

"But first he'd have to divorce—" Moore was nodding his head like some little kid. "Okay. Good work. Now grab a cab and follow our grievin' widow."

Moore Shows His Stuff

Moore had followed the Packard phaeton carrying the Widow Haynes to a town house on East 68th Street and was surprised to see that after she entered the house, McGuire drove off.

Perplexed, the young cop had the cab wait in front of a building site down the street. He got out and stretched his legs. Construction was going on all over this section of the city. Big town houses and mansions.

Maybe McGuire was doing an errand and was coming back for her later. Moore was fretting that he might be standing here the rest of the afternoon while Clancy was solving the case some-

where else, when a tan Cord sedan pulled up in front of the town house. Out stepped another uniformed chauffeur. The man went right up to the door and Mrs. Haynes came out like she'd been awaiting his arrival.

The chauffeur took a large dark red satchel from the maid, put it on the seat next to him, and off they drove.

The Widow Haynes didn't go home. Instead, the tan automobile delivered her to an apartment building on West 57th Street.

Moore tapped the cabbie on the shoulder. "Okay, okay, go around the corner and pull over." Pay dirt. But what the hell was this place?

The cabbie told him before he could ask. "That's the Buckingham Apartment Hotel. You want I should get closer?"

"No." Moore shoved four bits at the man, got out, and walked the half block to the building. The Cord was nowhere to be seen.

A doorman in an admiral's uniform stood guard at the door; his shoulders looked like curtain trim at a movie palace.

Moore flashed his detective buzzer. "The lady who just went in—"

The doorman gave him a blank look. "No one just went in."

"Oh, come on, don't give me that malarkey. The lady in black. She just went in. I saw her with my own eyes."

"You are mistaken, sir."

"Let me talk to the elevator man. He must have taken her up."

"Wait here and I'll ask Marcus." The doorman tried to shut the door in his face, but Moore stopped it with the blunt tip of his shiny cordovan shoe. Would they treat Clancy like that? He smirked. Quicker than they did him, for sure. He eased into the lobby, a palace with marble everywhere and crystal chandeliers, pausing only to give his scuffed cordovan a quick shine on the back of his pant leg.

The gold-braided elevator man stood like a sentry in front of

his elevator. With a scornful stare at Moore, the doorman returned to his post.

'I'm Detective Moore. The small lady in black, Mrs. Haynes who just came into this building? Who's she visiting? What floor you take her to?"

"We never discuss our residents.' The elevator man gave a nod to the man behind a large mahogany desk. The concierge.

Moore showed his badge again. 'Police business.

The concierge, not moving from his post, spoke in a soft voice that carried clear across the lobby. "No one came through the door in the last half hour. Marcus did not take anyone upstairs.'

Moore was furious. They were covering for her. Clancy would come down hard on him for not getting the information. What would Clancy do if they stalled around with *him*? Probably pull out his gat and scare the shit out of them. The tough-guy approach was not Moore's style. Sometimes he wished it was. He pushed past the doorman and stood on the street, steaming.

'Well, look who's here,' crooned a sultry voice. A hand touched his arm.

Moore turned and found himself gaping at a vision in glistening pink, her pretty shoulders scarcely covered by the fur. Lily Blume, the girl Clancy had called the Daffodil.

'As I live and breathe, it's Detective Moore, isn't it? You came to see me and found I wasn't home.' She dug into her tiny tasseled bag and brought out a silver flask. Her fur slipped and he could see right down her dress. 'One for the road? It's a long and dark highway.' She half closed her eyes and shifted her weight so her soft flesh pressed against him.

'No, thank you.' Damn. She was real pretty. He felt his face going red.

'Empty, anyway. My, my, I am forgetting my manners. Come on up and I'll see you get a real taste—' She smiled at him.

"You live here?"

"Yes." She stood on tiptoe and poked a finger in his Irish curl, slipped the finger into his ear. "But don't get any ideas. I'm just offering a drink."

She smelled like sweet flowers. "That's very hospitable of you, Miss Blume." She might have some information he lied to himself. It was an excuse to just get closer to her, is all. "Very hospitable of you, Miss Blume," she mocked in a haughty voice. "Enough with this Miss Blume bunk. Call me Lily. What's your Christian name?"

"Dennis. I'd be honored to see you upstairs, Lily."

"Damn right. Uh-uh. We take the side door." She led him around the corner where a tired old Negro rode them in the service elevator to the servants' quarters on the top floor.

"Make yourself to home, Lily called over her shoulder, pushing in the door. "It ain't much but it's my very own. To-let down the hall." She winked at him. "I get a special deal."

The small room held a narrow bed, a shabby bureau, a spindly chair next to a square table with a hot plate, a dirty glass, and an overflowing ashtray. On the sagging shelf over the sink was some china. Under the sink, half a dozen bottles of booze, labeled and all.

"Have a seat." Lily took a tug from a bottle and handed it to Moore. "Great hooch, straight from Canada."

Moore had a taste. "Who else lives in this building?"

She sat herself down on his lap and put her tongue in his ear. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Ah." Her soft ass wriggled in his lap. "Of course."

"No, I don't think you can. I'll bet ten minutes after you've had your way with me you'll be bragging it at the station house."

"No, honest, Miss Lily, I won't." He was dripping sweat. "I mean, I wouldn't do anything like that." But he wanted to, all right, and who was to say he was wrong if he got a piece of tail and some information, too?

Aha! She leaped to her feet and snapped two stiff fingers at the hard lump in his trousers.

"Ow." The chair fell over when he jumped up. Whatever excitement he'd been feeling vanished.

"That's for assuming you'll get to cuddle up with me without even an if-you-please."

"I never—"

"But you might. If you play your cards right." She loosened his tie, unbuttoned his shirt, and rubbed his nipples. "You like that, I'll bet."

His 'yes' was a hoarse mumble.

"So do I." Suddenly her pink dress was on the floor and she was stark naked. "Do me, Dennis, do me quick," she demanded, pulling at his fly, making buttons pop.

Moore didn't care, he was close to popping himself.

When next Dennis Moore opened his eyes, he was looking into the barrel of his own gun.

Polly Adler Takes Her Turn

She could have been anyone's sainted mother for the look of her, but looks can be deceptive and no one who knew her thought of her as a saint.

Polly Adler was the reigning madam in New York, and had enough on the high-muck a-mucks to send them all to Sing Sing and close down the city. But she made discretion work for her. Still, it didn't pay to cross her.

The champagne poured, Miss Adler smiled at her guest and raised her glass. "To the dear departed." She crossed to the window seat and raised it.

The Widow Haynes smiled. "To Foster, may he rot in hell."

Polly collected the large red satchel from where it was propped next to the sofa. She held it with both hands, grimaced

at the weight walked to the raised window seat, and placed it within.

"I'd just as soon not speak ill of the dead." She closed the window seat and flutted the cushion that lay on top. "But when a partner wishes to end a partnership, the partner doesn't simply clean out their accounts and book passage for himself and his new lady friend on the *Berengaria*." She motioned to her guest and together they sat on the sofa smiling at each other with great satisfaction.

"And a devoted husband doesn't decide to get a secret annulment of his marriage and remarry without making adequate arrangements for his devoted wife so that she can continue to live in the style to which she's become accustomed."

Their eyes met over the tulip glasses. "You've been a good girl, Ethe, and you will be accommodated."

Back to the Daffodil and the Cocky Cop

"Lily." The gun was too close.

"Dennis."

"That's my gun."

"Yes, and if it's as good as your other gun, it's a very good gun indeed."

"What are you doing with it?"

"That depends on you." She retrieved a camera and flashbulb attachment from the floor near the door. "I've got some lovely photographs of the two of us having so much fun."

If he'd been sweating before, now he was drenched. "What do you want from me?"

"I want you to get dressed and go to the station house and tell that pig of a Clancy that you lost Ethe Haynes, and if you promise me to forget all about this building, I may let you come back here once in a while and have a drink. With your great big gun, of course."

Dennis Moore dressed quickly. He was humiliated to have been taken in. On the other hand, the chance of a poor cop like him ever getting a piece of a daffodil was highly unlikely. These daffodils palled around with gangsters. They knew things from just being around. It could be his ladder up to captain, maybe higher.

The Best of All Possible Solutions, but for Whom?

'Ladies," Polly Adler said, pouring the iced champagne. "Well done." The steam rose from the cold glasses. Adler emptied the rest of the bottle on the hot stones. Fragrant steam filled the small space.

The women were lying on pallets in Adler's own private steam room, comfortably exposed.

"I have to hand it to you, Polly," Lily said.

"Yes," Effie added, "a beautiful plan."

Lily stood and stretched, rotated her hips, she loved flaunting her stuff. "McGuire is an expert with the camera. I wonder how his own tripod works."

The widow didn't move a muscle. Her southern inflections did not hide the undercoat of steel. "It works fine and I'll ask you to keep your hands off . . . his tripod."

"Now, girls . . ."

Adler's maid appeared with an armful of towels. "A Detective Clancy is downstairs wanting to see you, ma'am."

"That pig, he just doesn't know when to give up." Lily wrapped herself in a towel.

"Tell him I'm resting and to come back later," Adler said.

"He says he wants to see Miz Haynes," the maid said.

"My God, he knows," Effie cried. "What should I do?" She plucked at the towel Adler swaddled her in.

"Baloney," Lily snapped. "He knows nothing."

"He knows I'm here. Why would I be here?"

"Don't worry. Go with Lily. She'll take you out by the servants elevator. Where's McGuire, Lily?"

"Downstairs. He said he'd wait for her."

The maid saw her chance and continued. "Mr. Clancy said to tell Miz Haynes he has the bellhop's pants."

Effie Haynes let out a shriek, she sank to the floor and began tearing at her hair.

"Effie, where would he get the trousers?" Adler was upset.

"I was in a hurry. They were bloody. I threw them in the garbage bin." Effie, her eyes rounded in fear, was wringing her hands. "My God, my God, what will they do to me?"

"Please tell me it was not your own garbage bin." Adler demanded.

The widow began to sob.

"You fool," Lily said.

"Get dressed and go with Lily," Adler said. "And keep your mouth shut. You were home when he was killed, were you not?"

"But who's my witness?" Effie wailed. "It was Horton's night off."

"McGuire will swear that he did not see you go out. The killer could have stuffed the trousers in the bin to make you look guilty. I'll get Trommer to meet you at your house. Have a good stiff whiskey and go with Lily." She and Lily exchanged a meaningful look. Yes, Effie was going to be trouble. "Lily knows what to do, don't you, Lily?"

Effie trembled, pale as death, as if the elevator ride were the last mile to the electric chair. Neither she nor Lily said a word. The old Negro operating the back elevator didn't react. Things went on upstairs all the time and he minded his own business because it was better that way.

When they arrived on the ground floor, Lily murmured, "Pull yourself together. Nobody knows anything." She patted Effie's hand and went to see if the coast was clear outside.

McGuire was leaning against the fender of the Packard half a block down. No sign of Clancy.

Lily hissed to McGuire. When he looked up, she shook her head. She hurried back to Effie, whose fear had stripped her of all her hard-earned grooming and style. "Come on, Effie, pull yourself together. McGuire's waiting for you."

Under her black veil Effie swallowed a sob and reeled toward the exit.

Lily hid herself behind the door and watched through a slit of light while McGuire got into the Packard and started the motor.

"Going somewhere, Miz Haynes?" Clancy's voice was clear as a bell in the night air. He was standing on the corner, legs akimbo, smoking his cigar.

Lily inched back in her hidden position behind the door.

Terrified, Effie dashed into the gutter toward her car just as McGuire was backing up to meet her.

"Look out!" Clancy shouted, moving fast.

The Packard Deluxe Eight phaeton hit Effie with a sickening thud. She bounced two feet in the air and fell to the street like a rag doll.

Lily pushed the outside door fully closed and took the elevator upstairs to her flat. The colored elevator man kept his eyes and his thoughts to himself.

Lily sighed. She was tired. She needed her beauty sleep. After all, she had three shows to do tonight and Legs Diamond didn't much care for droopy daffodils.

NIGHTHAWKS

John Lutz

What was she doing here?

Amy often asked herself that, shying away from the answer every time. She looked around at the rest of the people in Nighthawks, all about her age—thirty-something—and most of them smiling and having a good time. The place was large and though the music was loud there was room for tables toward the back, where it was dim and something like quiet and people could talk and understand each other.

Well, they could talk and come to an understanding.

Amy sat at one of those tables where she had a good view of the dance floor. The band was live and in desperate good cheer playing the hits. During the fast tunes with lots of drums and bass most people on the crowded floor danced alone, or fast danced barely touching hands. During the slow tunes, they clung to each other as if they were drowning.

"Ready?" the barmaid whose name was Nancy asked Amy suddenly appearing at her elbow.

Amy nodded. "You bet."

She watched Nancy glide among the tables, then along the edge of the dance floor toward the long bar. There were a lot of illuminated brightly colored liquor advertisements behind the bar and softly colored lights from sconces set all around the lounge, with more of the glowing advertisements mounted here and there on the walls. The total effect was a flattering, uniform light, faintly pink, that softened features, did wonders for the

complexion and temporarily deleted years and wisdom. The bar itself was always busy by this time, eight o'clock, with patrons perched on or standing alongside stools, and others massed behind them waiting for an opening so they could order drinks.

Ollie, the regular bartender and part owner of Nighthawks, was a huge man in his forties who had once been a light heavyweight professional boxer. He'd gained weight since then and would have to fight heavyweight now. Amy liked him. He was always friendly to everyone, and especially the women in a protective way. And his massive bulk and thickened, once handsome features commanded respect from some of the men who couldn't hold their liquor and wanted to hold everything else.

But the biggest thing behind the bar, where you might expect to see a mirror, was the painting. A print, actually, much larger than the original. The owner of Nighthawks was a big fan of the artist Edward Hopper and his famous painting, after which the lounge was named. Amy often sat studying the painting, the stark image of a city diner late at night. Visible through the window were three lonely people at the counter and the white uniformed guy who waited on them. Inhabitants of a spare, cruel world. Everyone in the painting looked tired. Or bored. Definitely lonely. Difficult to know for sure what they were thinking. For some reason they were up late. For some reason they couldn't or wouldn't sleep. Not yet. Amy could understand why the owner liked the painting.

'Mind if a sexy single man sits down with you?' a voice asked behind Amy.

Amy knew that the voice, deep and throaty though it was, didn't belong to a man; it was Janice's.

Janice Walker was Amy's age and worked with her at Needlington, where they manufactured speedometers for cars. Janice came to Nighthawks for the same reason Amy did: to meet men. Not that there weren't plenty of men working at Needling-

ton. It was just that they were either married or the kind you'd just as soon not meet. It was the first time the two women had seen each other today, though it was Friday, a workday. Amy had taken most of the day off for a doctor's appointment, and Janice had gotten off work at the plant three hours ago.

'Sit your handsome penile self down,' Amy said, pulling out a chair for Janice. Nancy arrived with Amy's second margarita, and Janice sat down and ordered a whiskey sour. Like Amy, she was a reasonably attractive brunet though Amy felt that her figure was certainly better than Janice's, who was a little light on top. Amy's face was heart-shaped and retained some of youth's innocence. Janice's features were leaner and harsher, with a tautness as if she'd perversely had cosmetic surgery to make herself appear older. Unlike Amy, she'd been married, and to a man who talked with his fists. Janice had told this to Amy the day they'd met at Needlington two years ago. Though both women hadn't captured the knack of long term relationships with the opposite sex, neither had given up, so they became friends and sometimes referred to themselves as sister stalkers. Neither liked to think of herself as prey.

'How long you been here?' Janice asked. She had her tight dark skirt and a blue sweater on today, maybe some kind of bra that made her boobs look larger and gave her improbable lift.

"One drink," Amy said.

"You look morose."

'Do I? I'm just sitting here as usual denying reality.'

'You shouldn't be ironic, it's a turnoff. None of these guys has walked over here and asked if he could kiss every part of you?'

'Not yet.' Amy licked salt from her glass rim and took a sip of margarita. "That one over there, sitting at the end of the bar, gives me the glance now and then." She nodded toward a slender, dark haired man, mid-thirties, coiled on a barstool in the way of the tall and wiry, staring into the beer mug he was holding with

both hands. "He looks like he oughta be playing Hamlet, doesn't he?"

Janice turned back from staring at the man. "Yeah. He's almost too pretty to be a guy. Like he's the kind that might leave you testing HIV-positive."

"You're being kinda rough on him."

"Am I? That kind of tragic figure has his appeal, but you better leave him to enjoy his suffering alone."

"You know him?"

"Of him. All I need to know. Used to work at Needlington. His name is Jerry. I don't know his last name." Janice leaned closer to Amy and lowered her voice. "Rumor is, he tested positive."

"Oh? Just rumor?"

"Strong rumor, and good enough for me. They say it's the reason he quit rather than be fired. That way he walked away with severance pay. He's a looker, but I wouldn't get near him. Not that I don't feel sorry for him, but he's not the kind of lady killer I dream about."

He probably wouldn't be in here if he was gay, Amy said speculatively.

"True. But maybe he goes both ways."

"Should I care?"

Janice stared at her. "Aren't you the liberated hussy?"

Another sip of margarita. "Yeah, maybe I am." Amy didn't completely believe Janice, who had a way of stretching the truth. "If he's in here to date, like we are, you're saying he's a mass murderer."

Janice looked startled. "Well, I wouldn't say that."

"Of course," Amy said, staring into her drink the way Jerry was staring into his beer, "we're all going to die."

Janice gave her a phlegmy laugh. "Sure we are. But you know what they say. Timing in death is everything."

Maybe time is everything, Amy thought.

A tall man wearing a horrible green sport coat that looked as if it had been tailored from pool table felt ambled over with intense casualness and asked Janice to dance. Amy had seen him before, even danced with him. His name was Harvey, she was pretty sure. All she really remembered about him other than that was that he had bad breath.

For several minutes Amy sat and watched Harvey and Janice slow-dance. They could be a longtime married couple, she mused, with as many years behind them as ahead. Harvey leaned down and kissed Janice on the neck beneath her left ear. Janice grinned over at Amy, who felt slightly nauseated.

Jerry, she noticed, had gotten down from his stool at the bar. He was dancing with a short, Latin-looking girl Amy hadn't seen before. They were standing far apart and talking animatedly, looking into each other's eyes. Amy wondered if the woman knew she was dancing with a mass murderer. The music ended. Jerry and his partner said a few more words to each other, then they split and the woman sashayed back to her table while Jerry ignored her and walked back toward the bar. Typical male rutter, Amy thought. Probably struck out, so he no longer gave a fuck about the woman. But she liked the way Jerry walked, like a lean western gunfighter who might draw and fire any second. Something lethal in that walk.

The band had swung into another slow number before too many dancers left the floor. Janice and Harvey had hit it off and were going around again. Amy didn't know why, or at least at that point wasn't sure why, but she stood up and intercepted Jerry the mass murderer before he reached his still-vacant barstool.

He noticed her approach and stopped, staring at her like a carnivore who couldn't believe one of the wary herd was actually approaching him. The closer she got, the handsomer was Jerry. Lean but well-muscled, tanned and tendoned and tight. Clean

white shirt under a well-cut blue blazer, wearing Levi's and thin-soled buffed moccasins. It had probably taken him a while before the mirror to get that one thick lock of curly dark hair to dangle just so over his forehead. Johnny Ringo in town and cruising for action.

"I saw you out there dancing," Amy said, "and figured you were worse than I was. It gave me the confidence to approach you."

He smiled at her. Great teeth. "Show me what I'm doing wrong," he said, and held out his hand for her.

On the dance floor he was surprisingly smooth, and knew how to lead if you got up next to him like the Latin woman hadn't. She could feel his lean body working.

"You spend a lotta time in here?" he asked.

"It seems like a lot."

"So you live around here?"

She smiled up at him. "I live wherever I am."

He returned the smile, not yet able to believe this all the way. "I'm Jerry," he said.

"Amy Fortrell."

"Sounds like a soap opera name."

"Jerry sounds like a first name."

"Oh. Sorry. It's Jerry Graves."

"What about you? Do you live around here?"

"Depends on the definition."

"That's vague." Amy said, tired of circling and fencing, of wasting time. "Maybe we should be more specific with each other. Maybe you should show me exactly where you live."

He was staring curiously at her, still disbelieving his good luck. "Why?"

"So I can find it next time."

As they left together, the Latin woman was staring

He lived in a small apartment with a threadbare imitation Oriental carpet and old walnut furniture so dark it was almost black. There was a coffee table, two end tables with matching blue lamps, a framed painting of a vase of flowers that wasn't very good. In a corner sat an ancient television with a coiled wire on top where a cable box or VCR might have sat. The apartment was clean, though, and a glance into the small kitchen detected no unwashed dishes.

What am I doing here? Amy asked herself, as she'd asked herself earlier that evening in Nighthawks, as if momentarily bobbing to the surface of a dream. But she knew what she was doing there.

She knew.

"Where's the bed?" she asked.

"It folds down from the wall."

"Show me," she said, thinking Jerry had the longest eyelashes she'd ever seen on a man.

What passed for the bedroom in the apartment was an area behind a large three-part folding screen with Chinese figures on it. The screen concealed a small bureau and chair, and a table with a lamp made from a big ceramic jug. Jerry moved the table and lamp a few feet to the side, then pulled a Murphy bed down from where it was folded into the wall. Amy had never seen a Murphy bed before and was surprised when it emerged from the wall already, if sloppily, made. There were even a couple of soft pillows that had been pinned between mattress and wall and were now regaining their plumpness. Under one of the pillows was yesterday's newspaper, the sports page. Jerry absently tossed it aside.

They made love fiercely on the soft and squealing old bed, holding tight to each other as if a hurricane might try to separate them. Amy knew the reason for their desperate lovemaking, but Jerry didn't know of her secret knowledge. As he rolled off her she saw a reddened scab on his back, but she didn't mention it.

She lay on her back staring at the pattern of cracks in the ceiling, feeling a bead of perspiration slowly tracking down her right breast. Her heart was pounding and her blood roared like a wild river in her ears.

'You're amazing,' Jerry said, sitting up next to her on the sweat damp mattress. He bent down and licked the bead of perspiration from her breast, then stood up and walked to a wall switch. The paddle fan above the bed began revolving slowly, casting more shadow than air.

'It's missing a few speeds,' he explained, returning to the bed.

'You're not missing any speed at all,' Amy said.

He laughed, grabbing her, and they wrestled. The old Murphy bed's springs were howling.

"Don't you have a neighbor we might disturb?" Amy asked.

'Maybe," Jerry said, pinning her to the mattress and nuzzling her ear. "I don't give a fuck."

'Oh, yes you do,' Amy said, laughing. She knew she sounded like a woman more interested in sex than in love, but she didn't care.

He kissed her, and her dread had to wait in the distance.

When he pulled away this time, she was smiling. Loneliness was over.

It was perfect for more than a month. She never asked him about why he'd lost his job at Needlington. He never asked her how come she hadn't heard about him and his problems. She went into work every day but saw less and less of Janice. Amy thought it best not to confide in her friend about this current hot affair. Jerry disappeared from time to time during the day, saying he was going job hunting. She didn't believe him and didn't care if he was lying. His unemployment checks came regularly in the mail, so she supposed he was at least going through the motions of

looking for work so he wouldn't be dropped from the dole. But if he wasn't really looking very hard, she couldn't blame him. One thing she'd learned: there came a time in life when you had to think of yourself, even pamper yourself. Maybe that should be dismissed as the philosophy of the young. Maybe sometimes the young got it right.

But when Amy came home from work with a headache one afternoon, Jerry surprised her. He'd told her he'd be gone until evening, and as usual she hadn't asked where. When she opened the door at a few minutes past two, then walked to the kitchen sink to get a glass of water and glanced out the window, there he was sitting beneath the scraggly oak tree in the backyard. He was slumped in a webbed old aluminum lounge chair with one foot propped up on an empty cardboard box.

Amy carried her glass of water and went down the back stairs and outside.

She must have been downwind, she smelled the marijuana from twenty feet away.

He didn't notice her approach, or he might have flicked away the joint.

"Are you nuts?" she asked, glancing back at the wall of apartment windows behind her. "Anybody looking outside can see you."

He appeared surprised to find her there, but didn't look particularly guilty. He was wearing a sleeveless T-shirt and his curly dark hair was mussed, the way she liked it. "They'll see me smoking a cigarette, is all."

She moved toward him, and he tossed the half-smoked joint away. It landed between some flowers bordering the walk and smoldered. He smiled sadly up at her. "Does it really make any difference?"

She swallowed. "No, I suppose not."

"Why did you come home early?"

"Headache," she said.

"Still got it?"

"No."

They went upstairs, undressed, and made love with a new seriousness and intentness. They were both perspiring furiously and his kisses smelled like grass. He stared into her eyes as he mounted her and began thrusting, and she stared back and gave him every part of herself, to the darkest corner of her soul.

When they were finished, they lay side by side exhausted, the paddle fan flailing away above them. It was humming and ticking and moving only warm air. There were bite marks on Jerry's chest and shoulders. Amy knew there were similar marks on her neck, some on her breasts. She knew her fingernails had raked patterns of possession in his back.

"I don't want to live without you," she said.

"That's the idea," he told her.

They were both still breathing hard enough that the bedsprings sang beneath them. Amy was so happy she considered not keeping the doctor's appointment she had tomorrow.

But in the morning she felt different, and she did keep it.

And that changed everything.

Amy knew Janice had been surprised when she phoned and asked if they could meet at Nighthawks the next evening. But Amy had to tell someone before she told Jerry, who had driven to the next town to look for work and wasn't due to return until late that night.

When they were settled at a table where they could talk, Janice said, "Since you weren't at work today, I figured you might be sick."

"I did go to the doctor this morning," Amy said. "I didn't come in to work this afternoon because I felt . . . I don't know, I guess like complaining to somebody."

Janice gave her an odd look. "This is about Jerry?"

"This is about a cruel trick."

"I warned you about him, Amy."

"It isn't what you think. It's been fantastic. It's worked all the way with Jerry."

Janice smiled at her as if she were hopeless. Amy knew what she must be thinking. All the way with Jerry couldn't be very much farther.

Nancy arrived with a margarita for Amy, a whiskey sour for Janice, and a bowl of pretzels and mixed nuts.

"My cancer is in remission!" Amy blurted out, as soon as Nancy was out of earshot.

Janice gave her an astounded look. "*What* cancer?"

"I'm told now it might not even *be* cancer. Six weeks ago the doctors analyzed my MRI and CAT scan tests and told me I had a spot on my brain that figured to be a tumor. It was in an inoperable place and they thought it was probably malignant. This morning I went in for the results of more tests, and the spot is half its original size. They tell me they must have misdiagnosed it. They still aren't sure what it is, but now their guess is that it's a blood mass, possibly from a mild aneurysm, and it might disappear altogether. It certainly isn't cancerous."

"But you thought it was and you didn't tell me! Or anyone else, did you?"

"I couldn't. I didn't want to believe it."

"My God, Amy!"

"Crazy as it sounds, I thought if I told someone, it might well, make it all the way true." Amy took a sip of margarita. Janice had reached across the table and was gripping her free hand. Her eyes were moist. Amy said, "You're a good friend, Janice . . ."

Janice swallowed, then dabbed at her eyes with the white paper napkin that had come with her drink. "I guess that explains

Jerry. Did you tell *him*? I mean six weeks ago, when you thought you didn't have long to live?"

"Not then or now."

Janice sat back, looking at her old friend, obviously wondering how well she really knew Amy. "I don't understand. Why don't you tell him now? You have wonderful news to share."

"I can't." Amy bowed her head and tears came. "I mean, that's the cruel trick I was talking about. The irony. At least it might be ironic, what happens to me. Maybe my good news is only temporary. Not that I don't deserve whatever happens. Jerry and I both thought we were living the last, best parts of our lives together. Running out of time on earth together. And maybe we still are—only on a different timetable. We're both caught in a trap. Christ, Janice, how can I burden a sick man with all that guilt? How can I tell him?"

Janice shook her head in disbelief. "Wait a sec. Amy. Let me catch up. *Jerry's* sick?"

Amy gazed across the table through a blur of tears, surprised. "Of course he is. You know, he's HIV positive."

"Jesus! Jerry has AIDS?"

"I don't know if it's gone that far yet. I think I've seen some symptoms. We don't talk about it. We have a kind of tacit understanding."

"So you both thought you'd die together," Janice said. "And now he might have given you . . . Oh, Amy. When did you find out he was sick?"

Amy withdrew her hand that was about to lift her glass and cocked her head to the side. "Six weeks ago, when you told me."

"When *I* told you? Amy, I never said Jerry had AIDS!"

"But you did!" Amy's mind was whirling. "Right here at this table. You said that was why he lost his job at Needlington. He tested positive and somehow the company found out about it. He had to quit rather than risk his severance pay."

"Amy, he tested positive for *drugs*! Somebody in Personnel told me his urine sample showed he'd recently ingested narcotics!"

Amy slumped back in her chair, not noticing she'd spilled part of her drink on her jeans. Janice was right. She hadn't actually said *what* Jerry had tested positive for! Amy had filled in the blanks and filled them in wrong. Oh, *how* wrong!

Then the shock of what Janice had said began to wear off, and something light and wonderful rushed in. How happy, how joyous Amy was that she'd misunderstood Janice! Jerry was going to live! She was going to live. Their love was going to live! Nothing was forever, but right now, all the time in eternity seemed to be theirs. Amy's gaze fell on the *Nighthawks* print behind the bar. Never had she felt so far removed from the lonely souls in the sparse, desolate diner!

She stood up, rummaged in her purse, and tossed a crumpled twenty-dollar bill on the table to pay for the drinks.

Janice was staring up at her, trying to process yet another development. "Amy, where are you going?"

"I've got to get to the stores before they close. I need flowers, candles, and champagne! Two bottles. I want to be waiting for Jerry when he comes home tonight."

"Amy!" Janice's sharp tone stopped her.

"I'm so happy for you!" Janice said when Amy turned to look back.

As soon as Amy closed the apartment door behind her, she realized Jerry was already home. She knew from the faint noises, the warmth, and the scent.

She could hear the familiar singing of the old Murphy bed's springs behind the tri-fold screen. She could see the rhythmic interplay of shadows cast by the dim light near the bed.

Not even thinking to put down her bouquet of freshly cut flowers, or the paper sacks that held French champagne bottles and her new silk nightgown, she walked silently to look behind the screen.

Jerry was making love to another woman. On top of her, holding her legs folded back, grunting each time he powered himself into her. Amy could hear her moans. One of her hands was clinging to his bare back, the other waving wildly in the air as if trying to grasp something that wasn't there.

Amy must have made a sound. Or maybe Jerry simply somehow knew she was there.

He stopped his mad thrusting, raised himself up on his elbows, and peered back at Amy. The woman craned her neck to see where he was staring. A thin face, blond hair, startled eyes—Amy recognized her from Accounting at Needlington. Pamela, she thought her name was.

"Jesus!" the woman whose name might be Pamela said.

Jerry let out a long breath. "No," he said, gasping for air, "it's Amy." Making a joke of it. Trying to.

Amy didn't remember gripping the neck of one of the champagne bottles, didn't remember moving to the bed. Jerry said, "Ow!" Once. Said nothing the second time the heavy bottle struck his skull hard enough to crush it.

"Jesus!" Pamela screamed, trying to work herself out from beneath Jerry's inert body. They were both slick with perspiration and she couldn't get a grip on him that didn't slip off. She started kicking her long legs, the backs of her thighs still red where Jerry had held her. "Jesus!" she screamed again.

"Amy," Amy corrected her, and swung the bottle sideways across Pamela's face.

Pamela somehow flung herself out from beneath Jerry and fell to the other side of the bed. Amy walked around the foot of the bed and saw that she was frantically digging among the pile

of her clothes on the floor in her purse. Did she have a gun in there? Amy didn't care.

Pamela stood up, blood streaming down her face, one eye closed. She didn't have a gun, she had a knife. No, a long nail file.

Amy stepped toward her, the champagne bottle raised, feeling the sting of the metal file piercing her shoulder and breast. She brought the bottle down on Pamela's head again and again, hard enough to break the glass and send glistening shards and foam over Pamela's face there on the floor.

Absently Amy stared down at the nail file protruding from the top of her left breast. Then she looked at Pamela's nude body, streaked with blood and champagne. Pamela was a big woman, lodged between the bed and the wall. She looked dead but she might not be. Still, it would take her a while to get unstuck, the way one of her legs was bent beneath her.

Amy's expression didn't change as she pulled the metal nail file from her breast and tossed it on the floor. Jerry looked dead, too, the way one of his eyes was open and the other closed, but he might not be. It was hard to know for sure when people were really dead.

Amy went into the kitchen and got a proper knife.

Now Amy knew for sure what the *Nighthawks* painting meant. She wished she could be part of it, safely inside the starkly illuminated diner and away from life's irony and tricks. The people in the painting weren't lonely—they were there so they *wouldn't* be lonely. Outside the diner's glass windows was the night, and inside was light and the comfort of coffee and conversation. Not that the diners and the short order cook behind the counter weren't sad. They knew, and the painter Hopper knew, that the diner was only a temporary shelter in an inevitable journey, a stop

along the way. The irony and loneliness were out there waiting. The night would always return, and one time forever.

Amy thought a lot about the famous painting, sometimes actually trying to will herself into it. The guards let her keep a torn-out color illustration of it that she'd found in a magazine and taped to her cell wall on death row.

The magazine was *Time*.

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Bracken is the editor of *Fedora*, *Fedora 2* and *Hardboiled* and the author of *All White Girls Bad Girls Canvas Bleeding*, *Deadly Campaign*, *Even Roses Bleed*, *Psi Cops*, *Tequila Sunrise* and nearly eight hundred shorter works. His crime fiction has appeared in *Blue Murder Espionage Fling*, *Gent*, *Gentleman's Companion*, *Hardboiled*, *Juggs Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine New Texas 2001 Score Suddenly IV*, *TheCase.com Voluptuous* and many other publications. He has earned numerous awards for advertising copywriting and received a Derringer Award nomination for his short story "Cuts Like a Knife." He lives with his family in Waco, Texas.

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Bush's career has been interesting and varied. He has been a design consultant, a teacher, and a human resources director. He worked in a program for Russian refugees and has been honored for his work with prisoners at Marion, the nation's maximum security penitentiary. Once an avid sailor, he was sidelined by an accident and now writes full-time. He recently finished a novel featuring private detective Max Coppersmith. Currently he is working on a second Coppersmith novel and researching a historical mystery set in the Philippines during the Spanish American War. "The Last Reel" is his first short story. He lives in Minneapolis with his wife, Stacey, and their Kerry blue terrier, Max.

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Collins is the author of numerous short stories, with appearances in such top anthologies as *Murder Most Delicious*, *Women on the Edge*, *Murder for Mother*, *Murder for Father*, and the best-selling Cat Crimes series. Her stories have been selected for inclusion in the first three volumes of *The Years' 25 Finest Crime and Mystery Stories*. Her short story collection *Too Many Tomcats* has been followed by a collection of stories with her husband, Max, *Murder His and Hers*, and she was coeditor of the anthology *Lethal Ladies*. The Collinses' first collaborative novel, *Regeneration*, was a paperback best seller. Barbara worked as production manager on the Mommy movies and line producer on *Real Time: Siege at Lucas Street Market*.

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Collins is the author of the Shamus Award–winning Nathan Heller historical detective novels, the latest of which is *Chicago Confidential*. His movie and TV tie-in novels include the *New York Times* best-selling *Saving Private Ryan* and *CSI: Double Dealer*. His comics work includes Dick Tracy, Batman, and his cocreations with cartoonist Terry Beatty: Ms. Tree and the Dark Horse miniseries Johnny Dynamite. His graphic novel *Road to Perdition* was made into a DreamWorks film starring Tom Hanks and Paul Newman, directed by Sam Mendes. He has written and directed three indie features, most recently *Real Time: Siege at Lucas Street Market*.

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Collins (Dennis Lynds) writes the Dan Fortune series, which began in 1967. There are now nineteen Dan Fortune books, the most recent being *Fortune's World*, a collection of short stories spanning 1963 to 2000 that, with *Crime, Punishment and Resurrection* (1992), contains all the Fortune stories prior to 2000. His most recent novel is *The Cadillac Cowboy*, which features a new protagonist whose name may or may not be Ford Morgan. A collection of his non-Fortune stories, *Spies and Thieves, Cops and Killers, Etc.*, was published in 2002. He was nominated for his second Best Short Story Edgar in 2002. He and his novelist wife, Gayle Lynds, live in Santa Barbara, California.

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Dain was raised in Reno, Nevada, the setting for the Freddie O'Neal mystery series. The O'Neal series received two nominations for the Shamus Award from the Private Eye Writers of America, for *Lay It on the Line* and *Lament for a Dead Cowboy*. Other books in the series are *Sing a Song of Death*, *Walk a Crooked Mile*, *Bet Against the House*, *The Luck of the Draw*, and *Dead Man's Hand*. Other novels include *Angel in the Dark*, *Darkness at the Door*, and *Death of the Party*. Dain lives with Angel, her calico cat, in Ojai, California.

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Estleman is the author of fifty books, including the Amos Walker series *Peeper*, the novel that introduced Ralph Poteet, and historical westerns. He is a four-time winner of the Golden Spur Award from the Western Writers of America, a three-time winner of the Western Heritage Award presented by the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, and a three-time winner of the Private Eye Writers of America Shamus Award. In addition, he has been nominated for the Edgar Allan Poe Award, the National Book Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. He received an Honorary Doctorate of Human Letters from his alma mater, Eastern Michigan University. *Something Borrowed, Something Black*, the first Peter Macklin hit man novel in fifteen years, was published in 2002. Estleman lives in Michigan with his wife, Deborah Morgan.

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Miller is the popular author of *Slob*, *Frenzy*, *Chaingang*, *Profane Men*, and many other thrillers. Miller suffered a massive stroke in 1996

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Pelegrimas has written in the horror, mystery, dark fantasy, science fiction, and western genres. She is also a produced playwright and an award-winning poet with more than two hundred published poems to her credit. Her historical novel *On the Strength of Wings* was published in July 2001. It is the first novel of a projected trilogy. She is currently at work on the second. She has written more than forty short stories in

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